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Girls at Fairmount



THE
FAIRMOUNT
GIRLS
SERIES

Etta Anthony Baker

Juvenile literature - Fiction
American



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FROLICS AT FAIRMOUNT

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"LILIAN DESCENDED WITH MORE HASTE THAN GRACE."

FRONTISPIECE. See page 54

The Fairmount Girls Series

FROLICS AT FAIRMOUNT

BY

ETTA ANTHONY BAKER

AUTHOR OF "THE GIRLS OF FAIRMOUNT"
"THE YOUNGSTERS OF CENTERVILLE," ETC.

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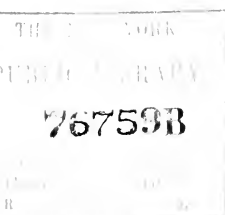
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TO
LOTTIE

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INTRODUCTION

FAIRMOUNT ACADEMY, "the nicest school in the whole world," is beautifully situated on the banks of the Hudson, not far from New York City. This particular bend of the river has been called New York's "educational excrescence" because on it one finds not only Fairmount's pretty, vine-covered, gray stone buildings, but also the severe-looking hall and barracks of Eustis, the military school for boys; while directly across the river rises Stanleigh Hall, the rival school for girls — an imposing structure of brick and stone.

The aims of the two girls' schools are very different, however. Stanleigh Hall is a college preparatory, whose diploma admits to Vassar, Smith, Barnard or Wellesley; Fairmount is a finishing school, pure and simple; so the rivalry is not a very serious affair.

"You see Stanleigh stands for 'blue-stockings,' spectacles and 'isms,'" Belle Gray was once reported to have characterized it. To which Stanleigh promptly retorted that "'blue stockings,' spectacles and 'isms' were preferable to 'open-works,' lorgnettes and 'spasms!'"

The two schools seldom came in contact with one another, so it was rather a forced rivalry, after all, nursed in the hot-bed of girlish love of excitement. Only once a year, at the June water-contest, was it actively displayed. In this contest the interest centered chiefly in one race — the great race of the year — between the senior crews. The innocent cause of all this excitement was Colonel Arnold, Fairmount's patron saint, a kindly old bachelor, whose handsome stone residence stood just beyond the Academy grounds.

In the goodness of his heart, and because he was fond of young people and loved to give them pleasure, the gallant old gentleman had offered a silver loving-cup as a prize for the race. This cup was a beautiful design, the Winged Victory lightly poised upon crossed oars. When Miss Horton, Fairmount's principal, saw it, and realized how expensive it must have been, she urged the Colonel to add, as a condition to his offer, that the trophy could only be won by two successive years of victory.

"All right!" the Colonel had responded heartily. "That will make it ever so much more exciting."

And it certainly had! For the last few years the cup had acted like the veriest shuttle, flying back and forth between the two schools, but so far neither school had been able to take possession of it "for keeps," because neither had, as yet,

won the two successive victories. The departure of the cup for the rival school seemed to act as a potent spur to more strenuous effort on the part of the losers.

Even this intermittent rivalry, this shallow pretence, was laid aside twice each year, — in the autumn, when the Fairmount girls were the hostesses, and in the spring, when Stanleigh entertained. These semi-annual "Love Feasts," as they were called, were as jolly as the girls could make them. Each school tried to outdo the other, and each Love Feast was different in character.

At Fairmount Academy, four of the girls, Mary, Grace, Belle and Beth, had become such firm friends that they had been christened "The Quartette," while Tinker, Beth's tiny, white fox terrier, was the "Accompaniment." He was also Fairmount's mascot in all contests.

Miss Horton, Fairmount's principal, was one of those women who are "gently firm, and firmly gentle." She understood girl nature, and made allowances for girlish mistakes. The pupils loved as much as they respected her. Of the faculty, Miss Townsend, the youngest teacher of all, was the general favorite, from sedate Abby Anderson, a "special" who helped with the younger classes, to little Chick-a-dee, the school "baby."

As for Colonel Arnold, — each girl at Fairmount

felt that the dear old man was her personal friend. The good times which the school owed to his thoughtfulness and generosity were too numerous to mention. His sister frankly declared that Fairmount was everything to the Colonel. The girls were equally sure that the Colonel was everything to Fairmount!

This is a book of "Frolics," but the life of the Fairmount girls was not all play, not a bit of it! It was very much like a sandwich. The good times of which I shall tell you are the delicate slices on either side; but in between lies the filling — a good, thick, meaty one — of hard study: Mathematics and Science, Literature and History, mixed with a mayonnaise of Art, Music and Languages, with a liberal dash of manners and morals, self-control and mutual helpfulness for seasoning. But so cleverly did Miss Horton put in her seasoning that its presence was never obtrusive. If the girls played pranks we must remember that they had to "let off steam" in some way; that they were thrown together morning, noon and night, with no safety valve of home and family, such as the day-school girls have. But the pranks were innocent, after all; under Miss Horton's wise rule they could not have been otherwise.

THE CHARACTERS

MARY LIVINGSTON	}	<i>The Quartette.</i>
GRACE ARCHER		
BELLE GRAY		
BETH CARTER		
"TINKER"		<i>The Accompaniment.</i>
MISS HORTON		<i>Fairmount's Principal.</i>
MISS TOWNSEND . . .		<i>One of the Faculty.</i>
ABBY ANDERSON	}	<i>Fairmount Girls.</i>
LILIAN EDWARDS		
CHICK-A-DEE		<i>The School "Baby."</i>
COLONEL ARNOLD	}	<i>Fairmount's Good Fairies.</i>
MR. ARCHER		
HARVEY WINTON	}	<i>Columbia.</i>
LEE CARROLLTON		
HAL ARCHER	}	<i>Princeton.</i>
TOM APPLEBY		
LORIMER VAN PELT .		<i>Eustis Military Academy.</i>

FROLICS AT FAIRMOUNT

CHAPTER I

TREASURE-TROVE

Room number seventeen at Fairmount was neither the largest nor the handsomest room in the Academy, yet it seemed to have an especial attraction all its own. Grace Archer and Belle Gray had shared the room for several years, living examples of the truth of the statement that opposites attract each other. Grace was quiet in her tastes, mild, easy-going, and unassertive, the friend of every girl at Fairmount. Belle, on the contrary, was excitable, impulsive and aggressive, with a host of warm friends, and, alas! an equally large number of warm enemies!

"It's a case of push and pull, with us," she once described their friendship. "Grace lacks energy — yes, you do, honey, and you know it — and I push her along. In return she pulls me back when I get started too rapidly."

At all events room seventeen was the center of activity for the Quartette, in spite of the fact that Mary, the acknowledged leader, had pleasant quarters in room number twenty-four, and Beth, who was a great favorite, was in number ten. Number seventeen was always chosen for councils, grave or gay, and the bright October day on which the story opens was no exception to the rule.

Any one passing through the corridor at that particular hour would have thought involuntarily of the tower of Babel; yet only four girls and a very small dog were in the room. But start four girlish tongues all at once, and add to the result a series of ecstatic barks and yelps from an excited, delighted, little terrier, and see whether the sum total of the process does not produce a veritable confusion of tongues.

But then the Quartette had not seen each other for three long months. Grace had spent the summer at her uncle's log cabin in Maine — a quiet summer, very different from the previous vacation, when the girls had been with her. She declared emphatically that "Heart's Ease," as the girls had christened the pretty little place the year before, was one thing with the Quartette, and another thing without it.

Belle had stayed in her southern home, with an occasional jaunt to Old Point or the Springs to break the monotony. Mary had been to the

western coast on a "prospecting" trip with her father; and Beth had joined her father and her new mother for a delightful Mediterranean tour in Mr. Carter's new yacht.

"It seems ages since we've been together," Mary at last made herself heard above the chatter. "I think father and I visited every mining district between here and the Pacific. They say traveling is a liberal education, but give me Fairmount!"

"Shall I?" questioned Belle mischievously, as she wrapped a piece of white tissue paper about her comb, preparatory to playing "Here's to Fairmount." At her first blast Tinker gave a disgusted little "woof woof!" and tried to seek retirement under the couch. He loved Belle dearly because she petted him more than any of the others; and he had no real objections to the comb, or to the tissue paper; but to the combination of Belle, comb, and paper, or rather to the vigorous harmonies which resulted, he had a deep-rooted aversion. Finding his retreat cut off by the suit-cases, golf-bags, rackets and umbrellas which had been pushed under the couch to make room for the visitors, he vented his disapproval by putting his dainty little head up in the air, raising one tiny white paw, and "singing" mournfully.

"That dog has real musical intuition," remarked Beth.

"Musical intuition?" Belle repeated, in amaze-

ment. "Why, he always acts as though he detests my playing."

"But he loves music," Beth answered significantly. "Don't you, Tinker-boy?"

"Never mind, Tinky-winky," said Belle soothingly, as she relinquished her musical efforts, and began rubbing the small dog's ears; "it's a bad Auntie Belle to disturb a poor orphan, so it is."

"Other people besides poor orphans are disturbed by that racket," Mary remarked drily. "I've often heard the term 'ear-splitting,' but until Belle adopted the comb as her medium of expression, I never fully appreciated its meaning. I'm very grateful to you, Tinker; you're a public benefactor. Do you know, whenever I think I'd like to have a room-mate, I remember what some people endure from some other people, and decide to cling to my lonely estate. I conclude that it is better to bear the ills we have than others that we know not of!"

"Jealousy, Tink, plain jealousy!" Belle whispered into the velvety ear. "People who play ordinary pianos or violins naturally don't like other people, who are original in their choice of musical instruments, do they, honey? You know it's so, don't you, Tinker-boy?" But a rapid twitching of the little ear out of reach of the tickling whisper was Tinker's only answer.

"Is Miss Townsend back again this year?" Grace demanded eagerly. "Science and I have no 'affiliations,' but I'd hate it worse than I do, with any one else as the teacher."

"I saw her just before I came in," Beth replied. "She looks younger and prettier than ever. I'm afraid Miss Horton will be minus one good teacher, some time in the near future. Of course it is Captain Moffatt."

"And it's all due to that time she chaperoned us at the football game at West Point," put in Belle. "Do you remember that day? Let's hope the 'course of true love' will behave itself, in this case."

"It will not be very long before we have to entertain the Stanleigh girls," Mary reminded them anxiously. "We had our Love Feast last Hallowe'en, and that's as good a time as any, don't you think so? But what shall we do with them this year? Has any one any ideas? It's only four weeks away, remember."

"Ideas?" drawled Belle provokingly. "What's an idea?"

"Something you couldn't understand, child, so don't bother your dear little head about it," retorted Mary promptly. "Seriously, though, we must begin to plan for that entertainment. Stanleigh cannot be allowed to get ahead of us in everything. It's bad enough to have them take

the cup away from us, last year." She ended her speech with an impatient sigh.

"Oh, Mary," Beth said earnestly, "I was so sorry to hear of our defeat. I really did not want to leave before the race; you surely understand that; but the trip had been all arranged, so I had no choice."

"I know, Beth. It wasn't your fault, but we certainly missed you in the crew."

"What do you think Colonel Arnold said?" Belle began impetuously. "He said: 'I must confess that Stanleigh put up a good fight for it.' Did you ever! I shook my finger at him, and said: 'Colonel! Colonel! don't desert the ship, otherwise Fairmount!'"

"What did he say then?" inquired Mary eagerly.

"'Never, Miss Belle! but a good sportsman always acknowledges an opponent's fine points, you know, and respects him for them.'"

"I'll respect Stanleigh more when I see the cup on our pedestal in our hall, where it belongs," Mary flashed out aggressively. "That empty pedestal gets on my nerves. Visitors always ask silly questions about it. I suppose we can think of it as an incentive towards hard work. We are going to win next year's race if effort will do it."

"Mary's a strong S. P. C. A. girl," Belle com-

mented laughingly, "but cruelty to her crew doesn't count."

"We've had a play," Beth began, returning to the original discussion; "we've had a circus; we've had a masquerade; we've had a Colonial tea. Is there anything new under the sun, or the electric light, either?"

"It's too cold for a swimming party, even in the tank," Grace said thoughtfully, "and it's too warm for a skating party, and — and — what is the matter with Tinker?" she ended abruptly, as an excited scratching was heard. "Where are you, you rascal? Stop that racket and come here, sir! Isn't he a naughty dog?"

But Tinker only uttered an impatient little bark and scratched harder than ever. Beth got down on her knees and peered beneath the drapery of the window-seat, but could see nothing unusual. The small dog kept up a plaintive whining, digging frantically in his efforts to dislodge his booty from the crevice into which it had evidently fallen. Finally the girls unscrewed the seat and lifted it out, Tinker's bright eyes watching the operation as though he were trying to say "Thank you ever so much, for helping me."

"It's down in the corner where that tiny square of flooring is out," Beth announced.

"What is it?" demanded Mary curiously.

"I don't know yet. Get me something to dig

it out with, Mary. Hurry, or Tink will turn himself inside out. Thanks!" as Mary handed over a long hat-pin and a pair of cuticle scissors.

"Don't mind me, will you, honey?" Belle urged, in mild resignation. "Those scissors represent my worldly wealth along that particular line, but it doesn't matter if you break them, really it doesn't — not the least bit!"

"And of course a blunted hat-pin is so good for the hair," Grace added, not to be outdone in politeness. "It tears it out beautifully, I find. Welcome to our city! Pray consider the premises your own. I've always longed to emulate the Spanish people in their wholesale giving, but I hardly felt that you girls were ripe for the experiment yet awhile. Have my fountain pen, or my scarf-pin — do!"

"Oh! we're not hurting your precious hat-pin," Mary exclaimed impatiently. "Anyway, it's only a piece of cheese — oh my! of antique cheese, I might add, were not the remark unnecessary. Better hide your cologne bottles, girls! The temptation may be too strong for us, don't you think so, Beth?"

Beth muttered something unintelligible from behind the handkerchief she had pressed to her nose, as she finally fished up the offending square of cheese, and waved it at arm's length on the

point of the hat-pin. Tinker at once began springing at it like an animated jumping-jack.

"No, sir! you cannot have it!" Beth reproved him severely. "I'm ashamed to think you even want it."

But Tinker, not a bit abashed, made one spring more frantic than the rest, and succeeded in knocking the cheese from the pin. The soft thud it made as it fell upon the window-seat was accompanied by a sharp little click.

"What was that?" inquired Mary eagerly. "Sounded like a coin, or something of that sort. See what it was, Beth."

"After you, my love!" Beth replied graciously.

Mary leaned over and gingerly sliced at the mysterious wedge with the scissors. A second sharp click rewarded her efforts.

"It's not all cheese, that's one thing sure," she asserted emphatically. "Look here! it's a piece of glass!"

"Glass?" Belle queried, stooping over to examine the find more closely. "So it is! a pretty piece, too — such a soft yellow color! I wonder how it got into the cheese, and how did the cheese get into that hole, pray?"

"The latest, most up-to-date version of the time-honored query: 'How do the apples get into the dumplings?' Belle says she's a Southerner, but I believe she's a Yankee. No one but a

Yankee could possibly propound such conundrums. This one, though, seems simple enough. The bit of glass has evidently been in some ornament, probably one of the maid's hat-pins. It really is pretty, isn't it? Just see!"

She held it in the sunshine near the window, where it sent forth a myriad dancing reflections on sill and wall, while the center of the stone glowed like an imprisoned sunbeam itself,—a beautiful, golden glow.

"Maybe it's a diamond!" hazarded Grace.

"So likely!" replied Belle mockingly. "A diamond in our room, beautifully encased in a piece of cheese! Brilliant! Brilliant! The diamond, I mean, not you, Gracie!"

Just then there was a tap on the door, which Grace answered by a careless: "Come in!" Miss Horton herself entered, with hands outstretched, and a pleased light in her eyes.

"I haven't had time to greet my Quartette properly," she said, with one of her rare smiles, as the girls gathered about her, the cheese and its contents alike forgotten. "How good it is to see you all again. You enjoyed your vacations, I trust?"

"Oh! yes, indeed!" "Indeed we did!" were the enthusiastic responses.

"I myself remained quietly at Fairmount all summer," Miss Horton informed them. "I really think I have gained by the rest, too."

“Quietly?” Belle repeated, with mischievous dimples coming and going in her clear, colorless cheeks. “Why, the paper said you had gathered a bigger collection of lions than Roosevelt himself. We could almost hear them roar, clear down on our plantation.”

Miss Horton laughed good-humoredly.

“You mean the Arts and Sciences Convention that I entertained two weeks ago. There certainly were some great names among them. They all seemed to enjoy their week’s relaxation thoroughly. Everything went off splendidly except for —” she broke off abruptly.

“Oh! Miss Horton! how tantalizing! ‘except for —’ Do go on,” Belle urged coaxingly, while the others gathered closer.

“I am sorry I even referred to it,” Miss Horton said quietly. “It was the only unpleasant occurrence of the whole affair. One of my guests,” she mentioned the name of a well-known humorist, “lost a valuable jewel while here, and —”

“A jewel!” the interruption came involuntarily. “What kind of a jewel?”

Both interruption and question were in such perfect time and tune that they would have delighted the ears of Miss Barthold, Fairmount’s teacher of vocal music. The girls glanced at each other meaningly as Miss Horton went on,

but Belle placed her finger on her lip and frowned warningly, so no one spoke.

“It was a diamond, I regret to say; a stone which had historical associations that rendered it almost priceless, although not so valuable in itself. Its owner was very proud of it. We all thought it foolish for him to carry it about as he did, but he said that he had a unique case for it — one of his own invention — that would baffle the cleverest thief. After his loss, when the house was being searched from top to bottom, he still refused to reveal the secret. I really felt provoked in spite of my distress, but it seems that a friend had prophesied that he would lose it, so he wanted to keep the loss a secret as long as possible. Except for this occurrence the Convention was a great success.”

“We — ” Grace began eagerly, but was unceremoniously cut short by a vigorous nudge from Belle, who motioned to her warningly as Miss Horton left the room.

“Keep still, do!” Belle whispered sharply, dancing about exultingly as soon as the door was closed. “It’s the diamond, I know it is! We can have some fun with it.”

“But Belle, it belongs — ”

“Of course it belongs — but this will be a case of the joker joked! Let’s send him a telegram.”

“Oh no!” objected Beth, “we can’t do that.

Didn't you hear Miss Horton say that he wanted to keep his loss a secret? I judge he hasn't even advertised."

"We won't mention 'loss,' or 'diamond,' in the message," Belle laughed. "We'll give him a little dose of his own medicine. Wait a moment; I'll fix it."

She seated herself at the desk, and thought for a moment, then began to write rapidly, while the girls looked over her shoulder and read the message aloud.

"I am interested in cheese. Are you?"

"TINKER TERRIER,

"Room 17, Fairmount Academy,

"Fairmount, N. Y."

"Come on! Hurry!" Belle urged excitedly, as she finished the writing. "Miss Horton said she was going to her study, so she won't hear us telephoning this to the telegraph office."

"Maybe he won't pay any attention to it," objected Beth.

"Yes, or maybe he's away lecturing," added Grace.

"Oh! 'maybees' don't fly in October," replied Belle impatiently. "I'll warrant, from the way Miss Horton spoke, that he would stop in the middle of a lecture to answer this telegram."

The next two hours were spent by the Quartette in making life a burden to the operator in the telegraph office.

“ I’ll send ’em a telegram myself,” the man declared savagely, as he turned away from answering a fifth request for a message. “ It’s just some joke of theirs, anyhow; somethin’ about likin’ cheese! I tell ye, after that there Academy opens a man ought to git double pay; he earns it! ”

But the agent was relieved from the painful necessity of concocting an answer by the arrival of the message itself. It was short and crisp.

“ I am, most decidedly! Will reach Fairmount at five.”

It was signed with the great man’s nom-de-plume.

Four eager girls accompanied by one unconcerned small dog, watched the driveway anxiously as the hands on the great clock in the office neared five. After what seemed to them an interminable wait, they heard wheels rolling up the drive, and saw the great man jump from the cab with the spryness of a boy of twenty. They laughed softly as they witnessed Miss Horton’s greeting, a queer mingling of pleased surprise and surprised pleasure.

“ How glad I am to see you,” she said warmly.

"But I have no news, I am sorry to say — no news at all."

"Oh! I came to see Tinker," the humorist remarked in a matter-of-fact tone, as he shook hands heartily.

"To see Tinker?" Miss Horton repeated in astonishment. "Why, Tinker is a fox terrier, belonging to one of my pupils. Surely Beth — Miss Carter, is not thinking of selling him?"

"Oh no! I think not," he assured her gravely, much amused by her very evident mystification. "But Tinker telegraphed me on a very important matter. He has a piece of cheese for me, I believe."

His solemn voice was belied by the rollicking twinkle in his deep-set eyes.

"I hope those girls have not —" Miss Horton stopped abruptly, remembering her confidence to them that afternoon. "I am afraid they are playing some prank," she ended regretfully.

"No, I don't think they are," he reassured her quietly. "The telegram displayed real knowledge of my affairs. May I see his canine lordship, and, I hope, prove property?"

Then the girls appeared with suspicious promptitude, and the matter was adjusted with much laughter. Miss Horton herself entered into the joke quite heartily.

"But I fear it speaks badly for my housekeeping," she exclaimed ruefully.

"Oh, no, Miss Horton," Grace assured her hurriedly. "No one can see that hole until the seat is unscrewed and lifted out. We only discovered it by accident ourselves. Tinker smelled the cheese, you know; he loves it dearly. Besides, we once hid some candy there, just to tease him, and he's remembered the place ever since."

"But how did the diamond get into the cheese?" Belle asked curiously.

"Thereby hangs a tale!" the humorist began solemnly. "A friend of mine has insisted that sooner or later this diamond of mine would disappear. He hoped it would be sooner, to prove himself a true prophet. The loss of my diamond was a secondary consideration, you understand. So, in order to disappoint his hopes, I have tried to take extra precautions — a careful carelessness, one might call it. I conceived the brilliant idea of concealing my treasure by pressing it into a bit of roll or bread, and tossing it carelessly upon my dresser. That night my dinner roll was so very excellent," he bowed laughingly to Miss Horton, "that I forgot and ate it all, so I was forced to substitute a bit of cheese as a treasure chest."

"A pretty clever idea!" Miss Horton commented.

"But, like all such ideas, it has its drawbacks," the man replied, with his hearty laugh. "Once I tossed a piece of bread to one of the squirrels in

Central Park. Just as he whisked it up and started to scamper away I realized that my diamond had been thrown — not before swine, exactly, but where it would scarcely be appreciated. I started in pursuit, and very nearly spent the night in a police station as a result. Only the dropping of the stone, and the word of a passing acquaintance that I was neither a lunatic nor a thief convinced the irate Park policeman. This second narrow escape has decided me: I present my treasure to the museum to-morrow. They have asked for it more than once.

“The question before the house now, is: what can a very grateful man do to repay these ladies fair for their service to him? Anything! anything! to the half of my kingdom!”

“Really?” questioned Mary earnestly. “Oh! would you be willing to read to us some night? Some of your own stories, I mean. Would you?”

“Sure thing!” was the boyishly slangy reply. “When do you want me?”

The same inspiration came to them all at the same instant.

“Hallowe’en!” was the answer, in breathless chorus.

He consulted his engagement book before committing himself, then announced genially: “So be it!” after which he shook hands all around,

stooping to bestow an approving pat upon little Tinker, and took his departure, while four exultant girls performed an impromptu dance of purest joy, and Miss Horton hurried to set a trap for Madam Mouse.

CHAPTER II

CUPID'S ASSISTANTS

FOR the next few days the Quartette went about beaming with importance. Again and again were they plied with questions as to the cause of their joy, but their answers were vague and unsatisfactory. They had agreed, in the privacy of number seventeen, to keep the Love Feast program a secret even from the Fairmount girls themselves, but they found it hard work to refrain from talking of the matter.

Their lucky find, or rather Tinker's, had taken a great load from their shoulders. Not only had it provided the entertainment for the Love Feast, but it had also procured an attraction of such unusual magnitude that Miss Horton had already suggested sending invitations to the nearest neighbors.

"Of course I do not wish to interfere with your usual good time," she added thoughtfully. "If outsiders are included for the treat, I will take care of them afterwards, in order to leave you free for the games and fun."

It was several days before they decided upon

the form of invitation for the Stanleigh girls. Finally Belle solved the difficulty by taking a picture of Tinker eagerly sniffing at a piece of cheese, while near by lay a large, glittering jewel. The cut-glass head of one of Mary's hat-pins made a very effective diamond. Copies of this picture decorated the invitations, followed by the date only, forming a mystery which was simply maddening to the Stanleighites, as the committee knew it would be.

Three of the Quartette were gathered in number seventeen, as usual, busily engaged in sealing and addressing the Love Feast invitations, when they were startled by a vigorous tattoo upon the door.

"Grace! Oh, Grace! Belle! Let me in! Hurry!"

Mary was all out of breath, and, as she knocked, she leaned against the door so heavily that the prompt compliance with her urgent whisper took her unawares, and she found herself, a laughing heap, in the middle of the floor.

"The entrance of the heroine must never be unobtrusive," began Grace, mischievously, pretending to read from a pamphlet on amateur acting, which lay upon the desk. "As far as this particular entrance is concerned you have fully qualified for leading lady, Mary. Your entrance could scarcely be called unobtrusive, now could it?"

"I see you have just landed," Belle began briskly, as she stood before Mary, pad in hand, and pencil upraised. "Welcome to our city! May I have your views upon the Suffrage question? And what is your first impression of beautiful America?"

"At present," Mary answered laughingly, entering into Belle's nonsense, "I am most impressed by the hardness of your floors. Guess who's in the reception room?" she went on mysteriously, as she settled herself more comfortably on the floor where she had fallen, and pulled Tinker into her lap. "It's a man — a man we all know."

"Colonel Arnold," said Grace promptly.

"Oh no! not the Colonel!" Mary replied impatiently. "He doesn't count; he comes almost every day. Guess again."

"Grace's brother," hazarded Belle. Although she and Grace had been room-mates for so many years, and she had more than once visited the Archer's New York home, she had never yet met Hal Archer.

"Sorry to dash your hopes, Belle, but you are wrong again. It's some one's brother, though."

"Chopsy! John Armstrong, I mean. You know, that 'too, too solid' Eustis boy who was always talking about his sister," Grace put in mildly.

“Chopsy!” Belle repeated, in withering scorn. “Mary said a man! Besides, he hadn’t any sister. Don’t you remember, he told Mrs. Van — excuse me, Beth, I mean your mother, that if he had had a sister he would like her to be like — ”

“You’ll never untangle that if you go any deeper,” Mary interrupted.

“We give it up, Mary. End this heart-rending suspense, fair maiden, I pray thee, ere I die!”

Belle flung herself upon her knees, with arms outstretched beseechingly, as she warbled her request.

“Oh! stop your nonsense, Belle!” Mary said, laughing in spite of herself. “This isn’t grand opera.”

“But the man! the man who waits below! Who is it?”

“It’s — Captain Moffatt! And he’s waiting to see — ”

“Millie, of course,” finished Grace innocently.

“Oh, of course!” mocked Belle. “A young and handsome man like the Captain always comes to see his sister, always! How old are you, Gracie, six or eight? He asked for Miss Townsend, didn’t he, Mary?”

“Yes, and that big blundering Airy-Fairy of ours caught a glimpse of him, and immediately rushed off to find his sister.”

“Rushed?” queried Belle, with wide-opened eyes.

“Yes, rushed!” repeated Mary emphatically. “Actually she did! I tried to stop her, but for once the plump Lilian was too quick for me.”

The girls stared at Mary aghast, for the Fairy, otherwise Miss Lilian Edwards, was not only plump, but like the little girl of one-curl fame, she was “very, very” plump, and very, very much disinclined to exertion of any sort. It was hard to conjure her image before their minds’ eyes other than as ambling along weightily, or lolling about in lazy placidity. For a moment they forgot the main issue, as Belle said, in aggrieved tones: “There! Isn’t that just my luck! Things seldom happen in this school outside the ‘demnition grind,’ but when they do, I miss them. I’ve never seen Lilian run. Like the purple cow — I never expect to see her.”

“I’m afraid we are unkind in our remarks about the Fairy sometimes,” Beth said slowly.

“I don’t agree with you,” Belle flashed back in crisp accents. “If a girl is too fat because she will over-eat, and because she won’t exercise, I don’t think we need waste any pity on her. It is just as bad to stuff one’s self on sweets as it is to drink, so there! And Miss Horton has worked so hard with her, too, because her mother and father are very anxious to have her change her

habits before she comes out. They cut off her account at Stafford's, I know. She used to buy ice-cream sodas every day — two or three at a time — and five-pound boxes of chocolates, besides. I haven't any patience with a girl like that!" the young judge ended severely. "If I can find time, I'm almost tempted to take her in hand and reform her myself. I believe — I'll — try it!"

"Probably Captain Moffatt came over to see Millie, after all," Grace said, returning to the original theme. "They are devoted to each other."

"I know that," Mary acknowledged, "but he does not want to see her now. I tell you I heard him ask for Miss Townsend. He's been corresponding with her for ages — ever since that day she chaperoned us at the West Point football game — the day he thought she was one of the girls. Millie's a dear, but it's hard to make her see things in their proper light sometimes. It seems a pity he can't have a little chance. His military duties tie him down dreadfully, just as her school duties tie her down. How would you like to conduct an interview of that sort in the afternoon, with sisters and school girls all around?"

"I'll tell you later," Belle answered wickedly. "At present my knowledge of 'interviews of that sort' is somewhat limited."

"Well, I propose to give the Captain a chance if I have to kidnap Millie bodily. She was dressing when Lilian went for her. Can't we waylay her, or head her off in some way?" Mary's tone was almost imploring. "Listen!"

Grace darted to the door and looked down the corridor.

"Here she comes now, with the Fairy puffing along behind like an overloaded tug. We must stop her if we can."

"Behold the 'Detention Corporation, Limited,'" Belle whispered, as she flew to the door.

"Millie, oh, Millie! Come in a moment, honey," she called urgently. "I want to show you those snap-shots I took the day school opened — you know — the ones at the tea-table on the piazza. One of them has turned out splendidly."

"By and by, Belle," Millie answered, stopping at the door and peeping in. An invitation to room seventeen was not to be despised, because the Quartette was usually sufficient unto itself, and reserved this room as its gathering place. "My brother is down-stairs," Millie added importantly. "I didn't know that he expected to ride over to-day. I missed him last Friday, poor boy. You see I wasn't expecting him on that day, either, so I went in town shopping. But Miss Townsend saw him and explained my absence. Isn't it dear of him to come again so soon? He's so devoted,

especially this year. There are not many brothers like him."

Millie rattled on innocently, while the girls exchanged significant glances, and Belle smothered an unruly laugh by picking Tinker up and hugging him.

"I'll run in later, if I may," Millie called out, as she started down the corridor, full speed ahead, but came to a sudden halt as Belle sprang after her and caught hold of her dress, detaining her by main force.

"I'm going to send those pictures away to-day," she told her decisively. "If you don't see them now, this minute, you'll never see them. I'm really proud of the one where you are looking up at Colonel Arnold and laughing, while the chocolate is pouring everywhere except into the cup. I've named it 'An Elderly Gallant.' I'm sending it for the Mail Competition: it's so clear it ought to win a prize. But I don't intend to spend the five dollars just yet," she ended laughingly.

"If they judge fairly it will win, I'm sure of it," declared Mary positively. "I hardly think it does Millie's eyes justice, though, do you, Grace?"

She frowned meaningly, as she asked the question, but Grace was too near laughter to answer the appeal. She was thoroughly enjoying the little

comedy, even though she herself was not playing a part.

"Millie's eyes are her strong point," Belle answered with decision. "Your dress shows up beautifully, too, Millie; even the pattern of the lace in the yoke. But if you don't care to see the proof —" she stopped uncertainly.

"But I do!" declared Millie positively. "Please let me see it, Belle." Her waiting brother retired, temporarily, at least, into the background, as she followed Belle into the room. "If it is really as good as you think, I shall have a number of pictures printed to send away. Photographs seldom do me justice," she informed them. "The last artist — that Fifth Avenue one that you recommended, Grace — says that it is often the case: ordinary people take fine pictures while the handsome ones —"

Millie stopped abruptly, blushing furiously at her slip, while Belle pretended to faint into Grace's arms.

"Oh! do stop your teasing, Belle Gray!" she snapped angrily. "I should think your home must be ever so peaceful when you're away! You know what I mean, even if I didn't say it just right. It's true, anyway. Let me see the pictures, do! And hurry, please! You forget that my brother is waiting."

But Millie was mistaken: far from forgetting,

the girlish conspirators were congratulating themselves upon every moment gained.

"Lock the door, Mary," Belle commanded sharply. "If any of the girls pass they'll be sure to crowd in, and we only want you, Millie."

Millie beamed at the compliment.

"Besides," Belle went on, "films cost. I've learned that to my sorrow. The very girls who ask for the most pictures are the ones who never think of buying even a single roll. Some time, Millie, I want to take you with your hair dressed high. You can put some soft puffy drapery for the waist — flowered chiffon or net will do. You carry your head so well that you will look really stately, even though you are not tall. Won't she, girls?"

Belle was thoroughly in earnest now; so much in earnest that she forgot Captain Moffatt altogether, even though her one idea, at the start, was to "give the Captain a chance." She pranced off on her photographic hobby, with Millie trotting docilely after her.

Millie was undeniably pretty in a pink and white, china-shepherdess style, altogether unlike Belle's vivid beauty. Unlike Belle, too, she showed the keenest appreciation of her good looks, so that the girls felt it their duty to restrain her self-praise whenever opportunity offered.

By the time the "Elderly Gallant" had been duly inspected and discussed, and a date set for

the new picture, almost twenty minutes more had passed. Then Millie suddenly remembered her brother, "waiting all alone, poor dear!" and started towards the door in conscience-stricken haste. But the door was locked and the key had disappeared. Quite a heated argument took place before the affair was settled.

"You told me to lock the door, you know you did," Mary kept saying accusingly. "Didn't she, Grace?"

"I know I did," acknowledged Belle; "but I didn't tell you to take the key out, did I, Grace? Just suppose there should be a fire," she added virtuously; "and we five locked into this room."

"We could easily drop over the piazza roof," retorted Mary. "Look here! it's not much of a drop for us. If it were Lilian, now —"

As she rushed to the window to prove her assertion, Tinker scampered after her, scenting excitement and barking shrilly. One bound landed him on the wooden seat beneath the window. As he planted his little paws on the sill there was a sharp metallic click. Mary pounced upon him instantly.

"Here's the key! I put it on Tink's collar just to tease him. Come here, old boy, and surrender your ill-gotten booty. Can't you see that Miss Moffatt needs this key, you naughty little beastie?"

Don't you know that you must 'speed the parting guest' if the guest insists on parting? Shame on you, sir! There you are, Millie! Good-by! Give our regards to your brother, and tell him that you would have been down earlier if we had not detained you. When he understands he'll forgive us, I feel sure — and bless us!" she ended fervently, as Millie dashed down the corridor.

"Twenty-eight minutes clear gain," announced Belle, gravely consulting her watch. "If he is as much in earnest as I think he is," with significant emphasis, "he can accomplish wonders in twenty-eight minutes. It's a section of the dial not to be despised, isn't it, Tinky-wink? Pretty good work for beginners."

"Pretty strenuous work," supplemented Mary, fanning herself vigorously. "It was in a good cause, so I hope we will be forgiven. Nothing but the picture could have held her, Belle."

"Isn't it a fine one?" was the enthusiastic reply. Belle's photographic studies were really artistic, and she spared no pains to improve her talent. "This little plot of ours will cost me a roll of films, but Millie will make a lovely picture. I intend —" she paused abruptly and raised a warning hand to the others as a slender figure hurried past the open door.

"Miss Townsend! Won't you please come in for a moment?"

"By and by, Belle," Miss Townsend answered softly.

"But I don't understand that last science test you gave in the class, and it seemed so interesting," Belle urged plaintively.

At any other time such an unusual thirst for knowledge — out of school hours — would undoubtedly have aroused Miss Townsend's suspicions; she understood girls thoroughly. But Belle's breezy mischief was a particular delight to her, and her mind, just then, was dwelling upon something very different from scientific tests, interesting or otherwise.

"Please come in just for a moment," Belle persisted coaxingly.

"Why certainly, dear," Miss Townsend replied, unwarily entangling herself in the girlish web. With all her mischief Belle was a great favorite with the teachers. While neither mild like Grace, reasonable like Beth, nor a born leader like Mary, she was generous, whole-souled, and staunch in defense of her friends. To Miss Townsend she seemed the very embodiment of girlhood.

"Has Captain Moffatt gone yet?" Mary asked so suddenly that the little teacher fairly started.

"Why I — I don't — I think he has," she stammered incoherently.

"Because we owe him an apology," continued Mary; "don't we, Belle?"

"An apology?" Miss Townsend's surprise showed in her tone. "To Captain Moffatt?"

"Yes, ma'am," Mary answered; "for detaining Millie so long. She was with us for twenty-eight minutes," she went on concisely. "The delay must have annoyed him dreadfully, don't you think so?"

"And that twenty-eight minutes cost me a whole roll of films," supplemented Belle; "besides a big section of gray matter — Oh! stop laughing! it isn't a joke. I can't help my name. Study your physiologies, young ladies, and you'll know what I mean. Anyway, it seemed an age, that twenty-eight minutes, but I suppose it could seem quite a short time, under different circumstances, couldn't it?"

"I — I really couldn't say." Miss Townsend's tone, as she refused to continue the subject, showed that she had encased herself in what Belle called her "Faculty Coat of Mail." She began at once the explanation requested. As she warmed to her chosen work she forgot caution, and unwittingly used both hands on the window-sill, in making a measurement. Instantly a myriad tiny lights danced waveringly about in the sunshine on the sill. The girls glanced at each other with nods of comprehension.

"Thank you ever so much," Belle said sincerely, when the explanation was over. "Are diamonds really just carbon?" she added irrelevantly. "They seem so beautiful, don't they?"

Miss Townsend only nodded her head in affirmation, as she started towards the door, but Belle added daringly: "I know how to produce them, too."

"Produce what?" Miss Townsend paused curiously, wondering what Belle was talking about.

"Why, diamonds."

"You mean you know their composition," she corrected her.

"No, really! You take one West Point Captain, young and handsome," Belle's words fairly tumbled over each other in her mischievous eagerness, "and one chaperon, equally ditto; add four interested assistants, and surprising results will follow. Don't you agree with me?"

But Miss Townsend had fled, with her fingers in her ears, while the girls hugged each other in their joy over the romantic secret they shared. She reappeared a moment later, blushing and smiling.

"I may as well confess," she said happily. "You will keep my secret, won't you, girls? This," pointing to the shining result of the combination portrayed by Belle, "is not to be worn just yet. May I depend upon you?"

"Indeed you may," Mary answered for them all. "We congratulate you most heartily, even though it will mean our loss."

"Thank you," Miss Townsend answered simply. "I am very, very happy."

"Do wear the ring," Belle pleaded. "It seems almost wrong to put it away."

"Perhaps I will," was the smiling reply. "All the girls may not be as observant as my Quartette."

"It's because we are such superior scholars," Mary declared triumphantly. "We are urged to cultivate our powers of observation, and in psychology we are required to show cause and effect. But in this case we tried to contribute to the effect."

"She's little more than a girl herself," Beth said softly, after Miss Townsend had left the room.

"And she's a thorough scientist," Grace added enthusiastically. "After she graduated from Smith, she was offered a position in one of the colleges, but she refused. Her people do not approve of her teaching, but she thinks women ought to have a vocation. I —"

She was interrupted by a light tap on the door, and Millie, flushed and excited, entered before they had time to speak. They gathered eagerly about her, but she waved them away, sighing dolefully.

"I suppose I ought not to be surprised, but I am. Oh! I'm all upset! Something my brother has just told me. Please don't ask me what it is, though, because I promised faithfully not to tell. You see she — Miss Townsend —" Millie floundered hopelessly, and looked from one to the other with anxious intentness, fearing that she had already betrayed her secret.

"So you told Miss Townsend about it," Belle remarked thoughtfully. "She's a good confidante; you may trust her absolutely."

"No, I didn't tell her. My brother — that is — she knows — she's in it."

"I wouldn't talk about it, Millie," Grace advised kindly, taking pity on the poor girl's evident distress. "It's so easy to tell a secret before you realize that you have told. What did you get in your mathematics test this morning, Millie? I thought it was pretty hard."

"I had B," Millie answered absently, then harked back to her original theme. "Do you know, I always thought my brother would marry a society girl, but —"

"He may, after all," Mary interrupted consolingly. "I wouldn't worry about the future, if I were you."

"But it isn't the future," persisted Millie. "You don't understand, Mary, or you'd know —"

“Who’s finished her composition?” Belle called out gaily. “Not I, for one!”

“I have mine all mapped out,” Mary went on, to keep the conversational ball in motion. “It’s to be a real story. My plot’s a good one; it actually happened, in a little Western mining town. The rival mines were named the ‘Salt Shaker’ and the ‘Dice Box.’”

“You see, you don’t understand about my brother,” Millie began again, just as though the subject had never been changed.

“No,” Belle interrupted shortly, “but we will understand, and we will know, if you keep on much longer. If I had been told something in confidence I’d keep it a secret if I had to wear a gag, or lock myself up, so there.” She happened to catch a glimpse of Millie’s troubled face, and brought her angry harangue to a sudden conclusion. “I’m sorry, Millie, but I can’t help speaking plainly. Here we’ve all been working hard to steer you away so you won’t tell, and you keep steering about every time.”

“Very well, Miss Gray!” Millie was the personification of injured dignity. “I shall steer properly this time, because I shall steer out of this room. And you may be quite sure that when my brother does marry Miss T—” Millie stopped short, realizing her slip too late; but the others seemed utterly oblivious, so she felt relieved.

“Don't forget the picture, Millie,” Belle called after her, not at all disturbed by her angry exit. “Whether your brother marries a society girl or not, I want — that — picture!”

“All right, Belle,” came the response in mollified tones. “You shall have it.”

CHAPTER III

AN INTERRUPTED CANDY-PULL

EVER since the Academy opened, on the first day of October, the servants, not only of the school, but of the whole neighborhood, had been full of their coming festivity — an entertainment which was to end in a grand ball and supper. The affair was to be held in the Town Hall. It was discussed in all its pleasing details, for weeks in advance, until the girls knew it by heart. Very few of them had not contributed some article of finery to adorn one or the other of the maids, in honor of the grand occasion.

“It is to be their Charity Ball, Assembly, and Grand Opera, all in one,” Belle said sagely, “so no wonder they are interested. I’ll be glad when it’s over, though: I’m tired to death of the subject. Mary MacFarlane has talked of nothing else for the last week. I studied my history lesson, yesterday morning, to an accompaniment of grand marches and two-steps; and London’s starving mob was inextricably mingled with ‘i-sters’ and ice-cream.”

“Mary Mac says she’s never been to a ‘real ball,’ ” Mary added. “She hums ‘After the

Ball is Over' all the time she does my room. I can't help thinking how blissful it will be when that song comes true. I do hope they'll all have a good time."

It was the afternoon of the ball itself. The girls were gathered in Liberty Hall for the few moments before dressing for dinner.

"My white slippers are going," Grace said resignedly. "They are almost new, but I came upon Mary Mac examining them critically the other morning. She waited until she was sure that I saw her, then she put them down and sighed like a cyclone, so of course I offered them on the altar of the great occasion."

"Slippers!" Beth repeated; "I don't think you ought to complain over that! My spangled scarf — the one mother bought for me in Paris — and my long white gloves are to add to the glory of the ball. I hope they have a splendid time — the girls, I mean; not the scarf and gloves!" she explained hastily as the others began to laugh. "It is certainly a case of 'great expectations,' and it would be a pity if they were not realized. Isn't it too bad it is storming so hard?"

"It won't make much difference," Grace assured her. "Miss Horton is going to send our maids over in the omnibus, and I feel pretty sure the others will do the same. The Arnolds will, I know: the Colonel is always so considerate. He's

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just my ideal — a distinguished-looking, manly, courtly gentleman. He reminds me of the early Virginian settlers. I always think of them as full of chivalry and gallantry and — and all that sort of thing.”

“Hear! hear!” applauded Belle, adding earnestly: “But we agree with you, all of us.”

“I tell you what we’ll do,” Mary suggested a few moments later; “let’s offer to clear up the dinner dishes so the maids can go early. Then we can have a taffy-pull afterwards, with no one to bother us. Don’t you think it would be fun?”

“One for the maids; two for us!” Beth remarked laughingly.

“Yes, indeed!” the other responded enthusiastically, all except Belle. She stood erect, her face puckered up in comical disdain, her expression showing distaste in its every line.

“Oh! of course it wouldn’t appeal to you!” Grace said rather sharply, catching sight of Belle’s face. “Much as I love you, Belle, I do think you are pretty hard to suit, sometimes.”

“Hard to suit?” Belle repeated in wondering tones. “Why, the full beauties of the proposition were just making themselves apparent to me. I was cogitating — ”

“Wha—a—at?” came the interruption, in ascending scale.

“Cog-i-ta-ting,” Belle repeated, in the prim,

crisp accents of the teacher of Literature: "thinking, young ladies, thinking deeply. Some people never try to improve their vocabularies. I intend to learn some new word, like cogitating — 'a poor thing, but mine own' — every day. By the time I graduate I'll be almost as good as a dictionary. I've disposed of cogitating, root and branch; the next on the list are especially felicitous — 'innocuous desuetude,' 'valetudinarian' and 'unearned increment!' I'll explain them to you while you do the dishes this evening."

She glanced about triumphantly, but the girls were all in a deep faint upon couch, window-seat or chairs. It was not until she went on with her speech that they slowly recovered.

"As I said, I was simply cogitating why you checked your good impulses at the start. Why not give them free rein? Why just wash the dishes? There still remain the bread to set, the tables to arrange, the silver to polish, the —"

"Isn't she delightfully sarcastic?" Mary interrupted admiringly. "If we are going to do what I suggested," she looked disapprovingly at Belle as she emphasized the pronoun, "we ought to ask Miss Horton. If she's willing, we won't dress for dinner. We can't wash dishes and clean up properly if we do, to say nothing of making the candy."

"That's so!" Beth agreed, adding, to the sur-

prise of all, "I'll ask her. And I move we appoint Miss Belle Gray chairman of the dishwashing committee, with power to choose her own assistants. Cogitating is not incompatible with the task, I believe."

She disappeared laughing, after this parting shot, to find Miss Horton and obtain her consent to the plan.

"You'll make the taffy, won't you, Mary?" Grace asked anxiously. "Yours always pulls. A candy-pull where the candy sugars is like Hamlet without the ghost."

"All right," Mary assented willingly. "Let me see — what is that recipe? Oh! I remember now: to each cup of granulated sugar allow two tablespoonfuls of molasses, one each of vinegar and water, a lump of butter and a bit of vanilla, and do not stir while cooking, or it — what did she say, Beth?" she ended abruptly, turning to Beth who two-stepped lightly into the room at that moment, with little Tinker clasped tight in her arms, his sharp little yelps protesting vigorously against his treatment. The two things the small creature most detested were Belle's comb obligatos, and being danced about in any one's arms. Beth put him down when she reached the group about the fireplace, and he lost no time in seeking retirement beneath the couch, there to sulk out his displeasure in peace.

"She says —" Beth paused tantalizingly.

"Oh! go on, do! What did she say?"

"She says she's willing, only —"

"There, I expected that," Belle interrupted resentfully. "Of course there's a string tied to it; there always is. It seems to be a teacher's prerogative!"

"Look here, Belle," Mary began decisively, "if you keep that up it will prove a serious strain upon our nervous systems. Besides, you are not playing fairly. You said the next was to be innocuous — innocuous — something or other. Anyway, you haven't used it yet, so please keep to your schedule."

"It was a mistake putting that next," Belle acknowledged frankly, "because I really don't know how to work it in. I think I'll substitute eleemosynary or —"

"Don't mention our plan to the other girls, except the few we want," Mary said, pointedly ignoring Belle's teasing. "We can all slip up-stairs quietly as soon as dinner is over, and go down the back way. Ask the maids not to say anything, will you, Beth? It isn't necessary to ask Miss Horton: she never tells anything."

"But you didn't let Beth tell us what the 'only' was," Grace reminded Mary. "What did Miss Horton say, Beth?"

"Oh! just that the plan was a very kind one,

but that if we offer to do the work, we must do it thoroughly. She says it wouldn't be right for us to set the servants a bad example. And she doesn't want us to eat much of the candy — not to-night, at any rate. She especially asked if the Fairy was to be with us."

"Not if we can help it," Mary declared promptly. "She's dreadfully tiresome with those never ending questions of hers. And that exasperating drawl! Honestly, sometime I'm afraid I'll yield to temptation and prod her with a hat-pin to see whether that will hurry her. Oh dear! I suppose that sounds hateful, but she isn't entertaining, you know she isn't."

The girls seemed to think Mary's appeal answered itself, for they dismissed the plump Lilian without further ceremony. They could all testify to the tiresomeness of which Mary complained, and they had all experienced and resented her tagging.

On this particular occasion Lilian herself took a hand in the matter, and refused to be dismissed. The fact that the Quartette, and a favored few to whom word had been quietly passed, appeared at dinner in their afternoon attire instead of in the dainty, light, evening dresses they were accustomed to wear, suddenly dawned upon Miss Edwards, arousing her liveliest curiosity. She felt sure that some frolic was on foot, but what?

Lazy as she was, Lilian disliked being left out of things. If invited to join anything that seemed to her to demand undue exertion, she would drawlingly excuse herself, and watch the rest of the party set off without a qualm. But if not included — ah! that was a different matter! Then the desire to participate, at no matter how great a cost of exertion to herself, became overwhelming, and Lilian would make herself a burden until her wish was either granted, or she was left to sulk and suffer alone. Yet she was a good-hearted girl, and if she could have dropped her habit of asking incessant questions, she might not have been so tiresome.

“If Lilian joined a ‘personally conducted’ party,” Belle declared, “the guide would have nervous prostration or become a raving maniac. Her thirst for information is simply a form of intemperance, and ought to be treated as such, so there!”

On the night of the candy-pull, this thirst seemed to be unusually insistent. She questioned one or two of the girls nearest her, without slaking it in the least. By the time dessert was brought on she was still in the dark as to the proposed festivity, so she tried diplomacy. With a well-simulated yawn of indifference, she opened up her batteries.

“What shall we do to-night?” she questioned drawlingly.

“ Oh! the usual thing,” replied one of the girls, who was also in serene ignorance of the frolic on foot. “ Read a little, play a little, talk a little, then hie ourselves to the arms of Morpheus.”

“ Who’s that? ” came the inevitable question.

“ I’ll beat you at a game of checkers,” the speaker offered kindly, ignoring the question, as she was not quite sure of her own knowledge.

But Lilian was not to be cajoled by this offer, tempting as it might have seemed under ordinary circumstances. Besides, it came from a girl who was wearing a pretty, pale blue, embroidered batiste, and Lilian’s interest centered, just then, in the shirt-waist contingent.

“ What are you going to do, Belle? ” she demanded, with an animation that fairly startled the conspirators.

“ I, Lilian? ” Belle was sparring for time: this direct attack took her completely by surprise.

“ Don’t you want to play Ring Toss with us? ” Lilian asked coaxingly. “ We can start a match. It’s lots of fun if we have the front posts count five, the middle one ten, and the two back ones each fifteen. Come on.”

Lilian’s tone was sweetly urgent. She had the greatest admiration for Belle, an admiration difficult to understand, as Belle treated her far more cavalierly than the others.

“ Sorry, Lilian,” was the curt answer, “ but I

have work to do to-night. Ask me some other time."

"You play, Mary, will you?" Lilian persisted desperately, thoroughly convinced now that her suspicions were not unfounded. "We can play Hearts if you prefer it. I want to practice that, anyway, because Bess Appleby is going to have a Hearts party on her birthday. Of course I'll be invited: we used to live in the same town, you know."

An involuntary smile appeared upon more than one face around the table as Lilian made this frank statement, but it was sternly repressed, because the girls were gentlewomen at heart, in spite of girlish indifference and carelessness at times. Besides, they liked Lilian — at long range. But the speech was really laughable to those who remembered what Bess Appleby herself had said about it.

"I don't want to be mean," she had said, when telling them of the proposed party, "but I'm not going to invite the Fairy. Oh! I know," as one or two of the girls laughed softly; "we used to live in the same town! Yes, we did; but as I left that town when I was three years old, I haven't a very vivid remembrance of it. Besides, you know how she plays Hearts! If she gets the Queen of Spades she frowns, and if she passes it she giggles! Please don't mention my party to

any one. I'm not living at the Academy, so it's not a school affair, and I can ask whom I please. An' you love me," she ended gaily, "prithee bear in mind."

And they had remembered not to speak of the affair: a quick glance from one to another in that wireless method girls have, convinced them that no one had broken faith — yet Lilian knew all about it.

"Coming events evidently cast the shadows before them," Belle murmured. "How did she find it out, I wonder?"

"I really can't play with you to-night, Lilian," Mary answered the urgent invitation; "I expect to be busy. I'll practice with you to-morrow night, if you wish. Just listen! The storm seems to be getting worse and worse every minute. I'm sorry for the maids: it's so much pleasanter to go to a party on a clear night, don't you think so?"

They did, and those who were in the dish-washing, candy-pulling combination seized upon the conversational ball which Mary had thrown, and kept it flying back and forth so briskly that even Lilian forgot her unquenched thirst, and listened to the lively war of words that ensued.

"She'll run us down," Belle prophesied in a whisper, half an hour later as eight girls anxiously reconnoitered the corridor from the door of room

seventeen, before starting for the lower regions. "You see if she don't. That young person has a regular bulldog grip when once she takes hold of an idea. It was a mistake, our not dressing for dinner: that aroused her suspicions. I saw her look from one to another before she became so interested in our plans for the evening. We don't any of us want to be unkind, but in a school as large as Fairmount you simply can't include everybody in everything, now can you?"

"You can't!" Mary assured her promptly. "Let that soothe your uneasy conscience."

In single file they stole softly down the back stairs, scurried into the big kitchen and shut the door, but when they tried to lock it, they discovered that there was neither key nor bolt.

"Oh well! it doesn't matter," Grace remarked confidently. "No one would ever think of looking for us here, especially at this hour. Whew! Look at those piles of dishes! I begin to wish we had invited the whole school."

"'The great unwashed,' " Mary quoted laughingly, beginning active operations by lifting down a large platter and scraping it deftly, ready for the dish-pan, later.

"You will join the 'submerged tenth,' in a few minutes," Grace apostrophized a pile of sticky dessert dishes. "Will the chairman of the washing committee kindly set to work?"

Belle tried to ignore the invitation, but the rest persisted so strenuously that it was not long before she found herself presiding over a huge pan of boiling water, with an equally huge pile of unwashed dishes beside it. After her first distaste was conquered — Belle was very particular about the slender white hands — she began to enter into the spirit of the work, and scrubbed away vigorously with her short-handled mop, in an effort to keep the supply of washed dishes equal to the demand.

Many hands, even inexperienced ones, make light work, and many tongues, even girlish ones — the kind that Colonel Arnold claimed were “hung in the middle, and wagged at both ends” — make labor even lighter. Mary started the taffy before the dishes were finished. Then she stood over the seething, bubbling mass, watching it intently, her face a bright scarlet from the heat of the range.

“Fairmount’s colors, scarlet and blue,” one of the girls said teasingly, holding a dark blue ribbon close to Mary’s face. Mary retorted by popping one of the little balls of candy into the speaker’s obligingly opened mouth. It proved to be an unusually hot one — a punishment for the joke.

Just as the sink was carefully wiped out, the mop rinsed and hung up to dry, and the last dish stowed

away in the china pantry, the candy began to "hair," and the drops poured into water at once became crisp, so it was quickly emptied into the buttered tins and set out on the kitchen piazza to cool.

"I hope it will hurry," Beth said impatiently. "It looks so good I can hardly wait to pull it. I — what's that?"

There was silence for a moment while they all listened intently. It was not long before they heard, with aggravating distinctness, a slow, heavy step descending the back stairway. They had been so busy that they had completely forgotten possible pursuit.

"There she is!" declared Belle with calm conviction, casting a hurried look about the kitchen, to see whether there were any incriminating evidences. But not one remained. The dishes had been seized by the eager helpers the instant Mary was through with them, washed, wiped, and put in their places. The sugar and butter crocks, the vinegar and vanilla bottles all stood in orderly array upon the shelves, while the candy itself was safely stowed upon the piazza, not even within the path of light from the opened door.

"I ought to have burned some coffee beans," whispered Mary hurriedly. "Boiling taffy is so penetrating."

"If she'd only waited until we finished the

pulling," sighed Beth. "Let's appoint Edie to answer questions while we pull."

"Not much!" the young lady in question responded briefly. "I suppose we'll simply have to make the best of it."

"Indeed we will!" Belle agreed promptly. "Here's my best!"

Like a flash she disappeared into the dumb-waiter and pulled the door shut. The rest, quick to follow her lead, secreted themselves with equal celerity. Mary and Grace crept beneath the center table with its big red cover, which touched the floor on all sides. Beth and two other girls scrambled back of a clothes-horse that held a burden of freshly ironed sheets and tablecloths, making a perfect screen. Edie and Caro, after being firmly denied a harbor in the dumb-waiter, and pushed away, with equal firmness, from both table and clothes-horse, looked about in dismay, while the heavy steps, now at the bottom of the stairway, drew nearer and nearer.

"Get into the cellar!" came, like the Grecian host of old, from the depths of the wooden horse.

"Try the refrigerator!" was the next pleasing suggestion, from beneath the enshrouding folds of the red tablecloth. The ripple of purest enjoyment which followed was simply maddening to the two refuge seekers. They were about to give up

in despair when a voice sounded sepulchrally from the depths of the dumb-waiter, whose door was opened an infinitesimal crack.

“Behind the range! Quick! You’re both thin!”

The victims groaned but obeyed, for want of a better hiding-place. And they had no time to spare, either, for barely was Edie’s skirt gathered out of the public view than the door was opened with clumsy caution, and Lilian’s round face peered in inquisitively. Seeing no one, she entered boldly, and looked about in deepest disappointment.

“It’s funny where they are,” she muttered resentfully.

Her remark was followed by a queer little sound that startled her, but just then a shutter creaked dismally in the rising wind, which was lashing the rain against the windows with unabated fury. Reassured by the sound of the storm, Lilian turned towards the door, but stopped suddenly, sniffing the air suspiciously.

“Smells like taffy,” she remarked thoughtfully, as she opened the pantry door and peered into its gloomy depths. Discovering nothing unusual, she tramped over to the door which opened upon the piazza, and flung it wide. The hidden watchers held their breath in their anxiety. But the taffy pans had been pushed close to the house to avoid the rain, so Lilian’s hurried scrutiny failed to

reveal them. She vented her disgust by slamming the door and locking it; the fact that it was unlocked before evidently failed to strike her attention as unusual.

"I don't care; I'll find them yet!" she said aloud, making for the door to continue her search. Just as she stepped into the hall and was about to close the door a muffled "ca-choo! ca-choo!" sounded behind her. Like a flash she was back in the kitchen.

"I know just where you are!" she shouted triumphantly, if not strictly in accord with the laws of truth. Then she clambered up to the table and sat there swinging her feet back and forth in an aggravatingly unconcerned manner. Her first vigorous swing produced a quickly smothered "ouch!" from beneath the table, but Lilian was so elated over the successful finish of her search that it escaped her notice.

"You might as well give in and come out," she repeated, adding the tantalizing chant: "This rock shall fly — from its firm base — as soon as I!"

Just then a stealthy hand crept from beneath the enshrouding folds of the table cover, and administered a sharp pinch upon one of the swaying ankles. In spite of the vaunting chant, Lilian descended with more haste than grace, and was greeted by two laughing faces framed in a drapery of turkey red, peeping mischievously up at her.

Lilian joined in the laugh that followed with as much heartiness as though she had been a guest of honor instead of a persistent tag. Good-nature was one of her strong points.

It was not long before three more stowaways were dragged, protesting, from behind the clothes-horse screen. The two who had sought refuge behind the range appeared voluntarily, with beads of perspiration standing upon their foreheads, hair damp, and faces a brilliant red which would have outrivaled any rouge in the market.

"I've had more than enough of our hiding place," Edie declared with emphasis, as she fanned herself briskly with an asbestos table-mat. "I'm ready to be served — en casserole — with perspiration sauce."

She proved the truth of her statement by brushing the big drops of moisture from her forehead as she spoke.

"Who was it sneezed?" Caro demanded crossly. "She might have held it in a moment longer if she'd tried."

"She mightn't either!" contradicted Mary, instantly on the defensive. "I had the pepper-shaker in my hand — I was just moving it out of the way on the table — and I accidentally held it under Grace's nose, just like this!"

Before Caro realized what was coming, she found herself sneezing harder than Grace did.

"Now do you believe she might have prevented that sneeze?" her tormentor demanded sternly. "Do you?"

"No! ca-choo! ca-choo! no! ca-ca-ca-choo!"

The girls were laughing uproariously when a harsh voice from the hall startled them into quiet.

"Young ladies! Such unseemly levity! Shocking! Shocking!"

The door was thrown open and a laughing face peeped in at them.

"Why how —" Mary stopped short in bewilderment.

"Now that we have discovered them, Lilian," Belle interrupted calmly, "we'll make them include us in their plan, won't we?"

"But please —" Grace began determinedly.

"What is agitating Miss Archer, I wonder?" Belle inquired teasingly.

"How did you manage —"

"To discover you? Why, don't you know that the candy you've evidently been making has a very penetrating odor — an odor which is permeating the atmosphere? Lilian and I are too clever for you."

"Yes, Lilian," Mary retorted, mimicking Belle's virtuous tones, "but the last we saw of the clever Miss Gray was when she disappeared into the dumb-waiter! Now!"

“Are we not all trying to rise in the world?” Belle asked imperturbably. “Well, I rose, by my own efforts, too! Therefore I am a self-made woman! Now let’s have the candy.”

CHAPTER IV

“DARE! DARE! DOUBLE DARE!”

THEY found that the taffy had hardened too much during its long wait, but a judicious floating of the pans in hot water softened it enough for pulling. Then they had a jolly time drawing it out into long shining strands, and catching them up deftly just as they seemed about to touch the floor. They “looped the loop,” made braids and buttercups, and fashioned the candy into all sorts of grotesque shapes. Mary liked to handle a large piece of taffy, so she had made a generous quantity of candy.

“Be-elle! won’t you fix mine for me, please?” Lilian drawled, lazily handing over a dark brown mass which was put to shame by the creamy yellow portions of the others. Belle regarded the offering disdainfully.

“Cook couldn’t, by any stretch of the imagination, call your candy ‘euchre’ color, could she, fond as she is of that particular shade. Her dress for to-night is ‘euchre,’ she told me.”

“Euchre?” repeated Mary. “What color does she mean?”

"Écru, my child," Belle informed her loftily. "Only a person of superior intelligence and perspicuity, ahem! like myself, would have discovered her meaning unaided."

"She's beginning again," Mary whispered, shaking her head gravely, as she laid her hand on Belle's forehead and tried to feel her pulse. "*Dictionaryitis*, I diagnose the disease; a very severe case, I fear."

"Isn't Lilian lazy?" Belle complained, shaking off the tickling hand. "If a burglar should get into her room some night, she wouldn't have energy enough to say 'boo!' "

"Oh, yes, I should," Lilian asserted, with unwonted confidence; "only I shouldn't have to say it, because I have a better plan than that, much better."

The girls were listening politely. All during the "pull" they had tried to be attentive to Lilian, realizing that they had not been quite kind in their treatment of her, earlier in the evening. Lilian herself had seemed to enjoy the fun as much as though she had been included from the start, and now that she unexpectedly had the floor, she was in her element.

"What is your plan?" Mary questioned gravely. "I've often wondered just what I'd do if I should wake up some night and see a man at my dresser. I don't know whether I'd be courageous or not."

"I know what I'd be," Edie affirmed emphatically. "I'd be simply dumb. I only hope I'd have presence of mind enough to pull the covers over my head, so as not to disturb the gentleman. He might not like to be watched."

"A harmless quiescence of attitude would undoubtedly be best," Belle supplemented gravely.

"It certainly would!" agreed Grace; "if it is as bad as it sounds, it would frighten the bravest burglar that ever burgled."

"I wouldn't be quiescent," Lilian bragged aggravatingly. "I'd order him out: thieves are only brave when there's no resistance. Besides, I have a pistol —"

"What!" The exclamation was a startled chorus.

"A pistol, that's what I said," repeated Lilian, nodding her head like a Chinese mandarin. "And I —"

"But Lilian," Beth interrupted anxiously, "Miss Horton would be wild if she knew it. It isn't safe, really it isn't."

"You all take so much for granted," Lilian drawled provokingly. "Why didn't you let me finish?"

"Art is long and time is fleeting," Belle whispered to Grace. "Do you think a dynamite bomb would hurry the Fairy?"

"It's only a toy pistol," Lilian explained tri-

umphantly. “The kind boys shoot those big caps in. Tom Appleby gave it to me, on Fourth of July. He spent two weeks with us at Bar Harbor this summer. Tom’s such a nice boy.”

The girls exchanged quick glances of understanding. So that was how Lilian knew of the Heart party!

“You know,” Lilian went on seriously, “the stories always say: ‘And he found himself gazing into the glittering barrel of a revolver!’ But mine wouldn’t glitter, no matter how hard I polished it, so I rubbed it with some silvery stuff I bought at Stafford’s. It has a ‘steely glitter’ now, all right.”

She ended her confession complacently, not at all disturbed by the shout of laughter with which the girls greeted it. They all knew Lilian’s weakness for what Belle called “blood and thunder” literature.

“Nothing short of ‘mellerdramer,’ with precipices and bloodhounds, bandits and r-r-revenge suits you, Lilian. Father says girls are so foolish — always searching for something they don’t want to find. I think I’d pretend to be asleep if any one entered my room. I’m not heroic, I’m afraid.”

“I would too!” “So would I!” sounded on all sides. Only Lilian remained firm in her belief that she would order the intruder to depart, and that he would obey unquestioningly. No arguments

served to shake her faith in her own courage, should it be put to the test.

"I really believe you would do it," Belle declared soberly enough, but her great, dark eyes were twinkling with mischief: "only —"

"Only what?" Lilian demanded sharply.

"Only you'd never know that any one was in your room. You would sleep through an earthquake or a cyclone, Lilian, I verily believe. Mr. Burglar would simply take possession of your pistol and you would be none the wiser."

"You're all wrong, Belle Gray!" Lilian seemed almost on the point of tears. "No one could touch that pistol without waking me; I keep it under my pillow."

"I'm willing to wager that *I* could," Belle persisted tantalizingly. "Will you give me leave, Lilian?"

"Certainly," Lilian replied somewhat sulkily. "I am more than willing."

"Oh! you are safe enough, because you know I don't dare try it for fear of frightening you."

"It would take more than that to frighten me," Lilian assured her loftily. "I not only give you leave; I dare you, so there."

"You hear, girls?" Belle appealed to the rest. "'Dare! dare! double dare! Who would name of coward bear?' That pistol, with its deadly glitter, will yet be mine!" she declaimed, in ex-

aggerated style. "E'en now I feel it within my gr-r-rasp!"

Grace saw that Lilian was genuinely disturbed by Belle's teasing, so she gently changed the subject.

"As far as real burglars are concerned, we are all perfectly safe. Papa says only a pretty foolish man would tackle a girls' school. They'd be more apt to go out of the way to avoid it!"

Mr. Archer's opinion raised a general laugh. Then the party broke up, and all quietly sought their rooms, after reporting to Miss Townsend, as usual.

Before Taps, Lilian devoted a good ten minutes to increasing the "steely glitter" of her dangerous weapon. She'd like to see Belle Gray or any one else get that pistol! Just let her try it, that's all!

Not long afterwards the first gong clanged through the corridors. If it could have spoken it would have said: "Nine forty-five — all lights out in fifteen minutes!" Belle knew its message perfectly, but she had just reached the most exciting part of her story, so she read on swiftly, forgetting that time was flying even more swiftly.

"Better hurry, Slow Poke! There goes Taps!" warned Grace, who was already snuggled into bed. "The last gong will sound in a few minutes," she persisted, after waiting anxiously for some movement from Belle.

"Oh! for goodness sake be quiet, Grace!"

Belle snapped impatiently. "Talk about Tennyson's brook — you go on forever and ever! I can't stop now: she's right on the railroad track and has completely lost control of her motor. The train's coming around the bend close by — an express train! I simply must see how it turns out. Don't interrupt again, honey, please!"

"It sounds like Lilian at her worst," taunted Grace; but Belle, utterly oblivious to the sarcastic shaft, read on hurriedly for a few moments, then tossed the book aside with a little sigh of satisfaction.

"It's all right! She got across safely! Of course I knew she would, but I wanted to see how she'd manage it. A man came up in a big touring-car, and pushed her over just in time. He barely escaped, himself. He proved to be the brother of one of her college friends. Just think, I've never met your brother, Grace! Queer, isn't it? Well, here goes! I reckon I'll have to rush."

Her clothes flew this way and that; her boots went sailing clear across the room, and landed on the cushioned window-seat. She had just finished arranging her hair for the night, and was rushing to the closet to lay out a fresh shirt-waist when the last gong sounded. Promptly the lights were put out from the general switch in the hall. With equal promptness, Belle gave up her quest, said her prayers, and tumbled into bed.

"Miss Horton wants us to have everything ready for next day," objected Grace, "and your things are always topsy-turvy. If it isn't an automobile stuck on a railroad track it's a ship hard and fast on a reef, or a hero just winning a race, or something to hinder you. If there should be a fire in the night, or a burglar, you'd have a sweet time finding enough to put on, now, wouldn't you? You'd probably take my things, though."

"Of course I would, honey," Belle agreed genially. "Such a simple solution! But it's good of you to suggest it. Still, a burglar wouldn't be likely to care whether I had on a clean shirt-waist or not; and if there was a fire, I shouldn't care; so this question of dress resolves itself into unimportance after all."

"Good night!" Grace said pointedly, and was sound asleep in a few minutes.

But Belle tossed restlessly. She counted sheep; she recited poetry; she tried to yawn herself into sleepiness; but she had never felt more wide-awake in her whole life. The conversation in the kitchen recurred to her with aggravating clearness. Wouldn't a burglary be exciting! Of course not anything serious, like loss of property, but just the alarm, and the girls scurrying about like frightened mice. She'd like to take some flash-lights of a scene like that! Wouldn't she have fun with them afterwards, though!

But there was little chance for excitement either that night or any other. Still, such a thing might happen some time. She really thought Miss Horton ought to have a burglar-drill some time, instead of the everlasting old fire-drills they had so often. She wondered how the different girls would act, if put to the test.

"Grace! oh Grace!" she whispered excitedly, "what would you do if a burglar should come in right this minute? Grace!"

But Grace slept on in a placid indifference to the whole subject that was extremely irritating to her room-mate.

"She's really answering my question after all," Belle thought impatiently. "That's exactly what she would do — sleep! I'm tempted to take Lilian at her word and get that pistol of hers. She dared me to do it, and she'll never stop bragging about it until I do. Yes, sir! I will, right now!"

She slipped quietly out of bed, threw a soft wadded dressing-gown about her, and put on Grace's slippers, which happened to be nearest at hand. Leaving the door of seventeen ajar, she glided softly down the corridor until she reached Lilian's room. Once inside, however, the adventure seemed to lose interest. Lilian slept on undisturbed, even though Belle called her by name and touched her gently.

"She's really pretty!" Belle muttered in surprise. "If she were only not so fat!"

Then, in exasperation, she actually shook the plump lassie, but with no effect.

"I've heard of the sleep of the just; if it's sounder than Lilian's, it must be pretty sound. She won't believe I've been here unless I take the pistol as evidence."

Reaching boldly under Lilian's pillow, she pulled the toy out and examined it curiously in the dim light. It certainly looked business-like for a harmless bit of iron, she decided, as she clutched it firmly and slipped from the room, somewhat ashamed of her childish escapade, but unwilling to leave the pistol behind after all her trouble.

As she crept quietly along the corridor towards her own room, she suddenly realized that she was hungry, very hungry. Her long wakefulness was evidently responsible for the untimely craving. She knew there was nothing to eat in the room — Miss Horton discouraged lunching between meals, save for an occasional tea or chafing-dish treat. As a result, the girls came to the table with splendid appetites. Belle was not a coward. Her nature was too wholesome to give way to the silly fears that make some girls miserable, so she decided to go down-stairs for a roll and a glass of milk. She could explain her raid to Miss Horton the next morning.

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Fearing that the steps might creak and disturb the sleepers, she descended in the fashion dear to childhood days. Laughing softly, she felt her way along the wall until she reached the heavy swinging door which led to the first-floor pantry. As she pushed it open, she heard a muffled sound from the room. At first she thought it was caused by the storm, but as she stepped in, she heard it again, from the shelves at the other end, near the window. Her next thought was that the maids had returned from the ball, and were bent upon the same errand as herself; but a cough, unmistakably masculine, promptly proved the fallacy of this solution.

Instinctively she raised the pistol which she still held clutched in her hand, and backed towards the bell just within the room. She managed to reach it, and pushed the button violently, when there was a rush and a blow, and she sank down heavily, while the blackness of darkness settled upon her.

She did not know how long she remained unconscious. The first thing she realized was the sound of voices far, far distant. She tried to see who was speaking, but near-by objects waltzed off into space in a most unseemly manner. Even she herself seemed bent upon an endless whirl. Finally Miss Horton's voice, still miles away, penetrated her numbed sensibilities.

“Poor little girl! she showed great presence of mind in giving the alarm, but how foolish, to come down all alone!”

The next morning remained in Belle’s memory a jumble of pain and feverishness, with girls tiptoeing about, speaking in the sibilant whispers so soothing to a sufferer! By noontime she felt well enough to dress, but she spent the afternoon on the couch. As the pain from the blow subsided, her mental distress became more acute.

When Miss Horton learned that Belle had recovered from the shock she came to see her, and greeted her with a loving kiss.

“We are proud of our brave lassie,” she said kindly. “I hope the pain in your head has lessened? That’s good! When you heard a noise, last night, why did you not come to me, or ring one of the up-stairs bells? It was foolhardy to venture down alone, to investigate.”

Belle stared at her in amazement. “Brave?” “Investigate?” Was she dreaming? No, Miss Horton was sitting by the couch, smiling at her as she stroked one of the feverish little hands with soothing touch.

“How did you happen to hear the noise at that hour of the night, and in all that storm?” Miss Horton went on wonderingly. “You displayed great presence of mind, but —”

“Please, Miss Horton, my — my head aches.

May I go to sleep now? I — I was very wakeful, the other night — last night, I mean.”

The utter weariness of her voice, and the deep flush which spread over her face made Miss Horton take an abrupt departure, full of contrition for her thoughtlessness in recalling such an exciting experience before the poor girl had recovered from the shock. Belle turned her face to the wall and tried to sleep.

CHAPTER V

BELLE'S BATTLE

BUT Belle soon realized that sleep was out of the question. To her excited imagination it seemed that she would never sleep again with such a burden of deceit upon her conscience. She knew now that they thought she had deliberately encountered the intruder. They were praising her courage! There was only one course to pursue: send for Miss Horton and tell her the whole truth. She would do it at once. No! she wouldn't; she couldn't!

Belle almost revered Miss Horton, whose wise restraint was transforming a fiery, quick-tempered child into a self-controlled young girl. Oh! she couldn't tell her; she couldn't! It wasn't necessary, anyway, because her appearance had frightened the thief away.

"Why not leave matters as they are?" the tempting, inner voice whispered. "You gave the alarm: no one need know that you only went down by accident."

A veritable "Katy-did! Katy-didn't!" argument went on in Belle's mind, as the afternoon

dragged on, oh! so slowly. Belle began to understand the expression, "time's leaden wings." Unfortunately, the girls were not there to relieve the monotony, because it happened to be the day of an illustrated travel lecture which Miss Horton had arranged to help them in their work. But dainties, many and various, had been sent in for the sufferer's enjoyment, from chocolate creams and maple éclairs, to hot-house fruit and jelly tarts. Miss Horton had surveyed the array in amazement, feeling sure that if Belle were not already ill, such an assortment would make her so. It was evident that school-girls firmly believe in the efficacy of "goodies" no matter what the ailment.

It was Lilian, however, who capped the climax. Just before dusk she stole into the room bearing a mysterious burden. It was completely covered, so Belle never even suspected its nature until Lilian painstakingly removed a succession of wrappings, and triumphantly displayed a large glass of ice-cream soda! It was really little the worse for its travels. The foamy bubbles had departed en route, but to Lilian much solid enjoyment still remained. It represented, to her, the acme of effort in the gift line.

Belle was genuinely touched at this proof of the girl's kindness. She knew that it had meant a supreme sacrifice to the lazy Lilian; that a walk to the village had taken the place of the lecture, and

Lilian loved lectures because they called for no exertion on her part. There were tears in Belle's eyes as she thanked her.

"You poor dear martyr," Lilian replied. "I was glad to do it for you. I don't think you'll ever entirely recover from such a terrible shock. And to think that you had the courage to knock up his arm when he pointed his revolver at you! Didn't he look terrifying with that awful black mask on? It must have fairly blinded you to have him flash his dark lantern into your eyes in that way. I'm afraid I shouldn't have been so brave, even with my pistol."

Truly this was a day of surprises! Belle started to speak, but Lilian went on excitedly.

"He struck you with the butt end of his weapon, didn't he? Let me see," bending over Belle and making the couch almost dance a jig as she threw herself upon it to examine the dark blue lump upon the white forehead. "My! my! it's a regular mountain, isn't it? I shouldn't be a bit surprised if it left a permanent mark. It would be too bad, wouldn't it, except that it would be almost as good as a medal, or a Victoria Cross, or something like that."

Belle had tried several times to interrupt the torrent of words, but without success. For once Lilian forgot to drawl, so deep was her interest in the harrowing recital. So her listener waited with

as much patience as she could command, ready to seize the first opportunity for speech. It came at last: Lilian had to pause for breath.

"Where did you hear all that?" she demanded sharply.

"All what?"

"That — that story — about the burglar, and the pistol, and the lantern, and all the rest of it?"

"Why? Isn't it true?" Lilian's face betrayed genuine consternation.

"Not a bit of it!" Belle replied shortly. "Not one word!"

"But — but the pistol?" Lilian stammered, clutching at a straw. "Miss Horton herself picked up the pistol, so now!"

"Yes, she did," Belle agreed grimly; "but it was yours!"

"Mine? Honestly, Belle, I believe your mind's wandering! My pistol! Why, my pistol was under my pillow all night. There! there! don't talk any more, dear."

Belle smiled involuntarily at Lilian's pitying tone.

"No! it wasn't under your pillow all night," she contradicted flatly; "only until twelve o'clock, Lilian. I heard the office clock strike just as I pulled it out. I — I'm sorry I did it — really I am, but I said I could take it, and I did. Please, Lilian, do go. My head is throbbing so; it hurts

dreadfully. I can't talk any more, but I do think it was kind of you to bring me the soda — very, very kind. It tasted better than anything I've had."

"Did it? Really?"

Lilian was beaming again. Her romance was shattered; by the heroine's own hand, too; but there lay Belle, her especial admiration, thanking her with tears in her beautiful dark eyes. There was compensation, after all, she thought, as she patted Belle's hand with gentle touch, then stole softly from the room.

Belle tossed about after Lilian's departure, her mind in a whirl. This time the battle waged harder than ever. Should she keep quiet, and, without actually lying, allow this false idea of her courage to prevail? Lilian still believed it, in spite of her denial. Or should she confess the truth, the whole, belittling truth? Belle cared more than most girls for the good opinion of those about her, and to be called upon to forfeit it was hard indeed.

Dr. Harmsworth came in just before dinner, in response to Miss Horton's request. He found the patient's condition somewhat puzzling. A strong, healthy girl like Belle, accustomed to active exercise, ought to have rallied before this. The blow, while severe, had not been serious. He set it down to shock to the nervous system even while he acknowledged that she had never seemed in

the least addicted to "nerves." Had he said shock to the moral system he would have been nearer the mark.

All evening the mental battle waged furiously. It was not until bedtime that the victory was won. Miss Horton responded promptly to Belle's summons: the doctor's report had made her uneasy. As Belle made her pitiful little confession, sparing herself not at all, Miss Horton with difficulty repressed a smile, even though she realized the effort the confession cost. It was such a girlish prank! The good lady had not yet passed the point where she could not put herself in her pupils' places, and take their point of view as well as her own.

"It is all right, dear," she said soothingly. "I am glad you have told me about it, because it will help me straighten matters out. I have learned more about the man, since I visited you this morning. You seemed so excited then, I couldn't question you as I wished.

"The burglar, if one can call him so, proves to be a poor, harmless tramp in search of food—nothing else. The maids had given him some breakfast in the morning. It was then that he saw the day's supplies in the pantry. He knew of the ball at the Town Hall, and reasoned that the servants would all be away, so when he grew hungry again, that night, he remembered the place. He found it easy to pry open the pantry window.

He says he was eating when you went downstairs."

"Did they arrest him?" Belle asked anxiously.

"No. If it will not tire you too much I'll tell you his story. Colonel Arnold at once investigated and found that he spoke the truth. The poor fellow is not even a regular tramp, but is out of work. He was forced to go out on a strike, and never succeeded in getting in again. His reputation is good: he has simply been unfortunate. The Colonel has given him work in his stable until he can find something better, so your little adventure has not turned out badly after all."

"Oh! I'm so glad!" Belle exclaimed fervently.

"I talked with the man, myself, this afternoon," Miss Horton continued. "He seems a gentle sort of fellow. He never stole before, not even food. I know he must have been hard pressed. He seems to have been more alarmed than you were, when you opened the pantry door. He forgot the window by which he had entered and rushed past you, he says. He denies absolutely that the pistol was his, however. It proved to be a mere toy, but even so, he ought not to have had it."

"It was not his pistol, Miss Horton," Belle said eagerly. "That was the only thing I didn't tell you — it seemed so silly. The pistol belongs to the Fairy, Lilian, I mean. That was what I went to her room for."

"I am glad the poor fellow was telling me the truth," Miss Horton said heartily. "He ought not to have struck you, though; but I suppose the fear of discovery and arrest made him strike out blindly before he realized what he was doing, so we will try not to judge too harshly."

"But he didn't strike me, Miss Horton," Belle declared emphatically. "The pantry door swung back after he rushed through, and hit my head before I could put my hand out to save myself. I'm so glad the Colonel is helping him. Isn't that just like the Colonel! And like you, too! because some people would have had the man arrested first, and made inquiries afterwards. I'm so glad I told you all about it. If only Lilian would let the matter drop! I really am sorry I took her pistol, even though she did dare me to do it. But she's so aggravatingly sure of herself. Her three-volume novel has been robbed of all its thrills, so I suppose I'll never hear the last of it."

Miss Horton smiled openly at Belle's comical attempt at resignation.

"I'll see what I can do with Lilian," she promised, as she kissed Belle good night and left the room, leaving behind her a much relieved girl.

"That's over!" Belle declared, with a sigh of deep satisfaction. "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! Yes, I reckon that's the best, after all, but it's mighty hard to live up to,

sometimes. I'm powerful relieved, as Mammy used to say. After this I'm going to think before I act, not afterwards. But oh dear! I hate to do silly things. I hate worse to hear about them forever and ever, morning, noon and night, and that's what I'll be in for, surely. Lilian does hold on so."

But Belle's fears were agreeably disappointed. Miss Horton spoke to the school after Assembly, the next morning, while Belle was still in her room. She explained as much of the affair as she thought necessary, and requested the girls not to discuss the matter in Belle's hearing, as there had been enough excitement over it.

"Miss Gray fully realizes the real danger she incurred needlessly, just to gratify a passing whim." Then the good lady smiled to herself as she remembered that the whim which had taken Belle downstairs had been hunger, but she went on gravely: "Under the circumstances, especially in view of the fact that the occurrence may have saved an unfortunate man from a life of crime, I suggest that we all absolutely refrain from any reference whatever to the subject."

"But I forgot to ask her —" Lilian began volubly.

"Continue to forget," Miss Horton advised her so decisively that Lilian dared not disobey.

"All who intend to carry out my wishes in this

matter, in the spirit, as well as in the letter, may signify the same by rising."

Miss Horton had hardly finished the last word when the entire school was on its feet. She smiled approvingly, just as little Chick-a-dee's voice rang out in defiant tones: "I love Belle more'n ever, and she's awful brave, anyhow, so there!"

CHAPTER VI

PEDESTALS

MARY sauntered down the hall a little before ten on the following Saturday morning. She was dressed in a short skirt, a severely tailored shirt-waist, and rubber-soled tan shoes, and carried her scarlet coat-sweater over her arm. As she passed the bay window she glanced carelessly at the pedestal which stood in it, paused a moment irresolutely, then went into the bay, and stopped before the pedestal, regarding it with a thoughtful frown upon her usually sunny face.

It was a handsome affair — this pedestal — of carved mahogany in curious design, but, save for a small glass holder filled with water in which some sprays of Wandering Jew were growing, it was empty. All last year it had supported the beautiful silver loving-cup, the “Winged Victory” which Colonel Arnold had offered as the trophy in the great boat-race between Fairmount and Stanleigh Hall.

“And it has certainly used its wings,” Mary informed one of Miss Horton’s visitors, in comical despair. “It has taken flight each year. Such see-

sawing may add to the interest of the race — of course it does — but it is decidedly trying to the nerves of the racers! I wish I could show you the cup," she added regretfully; "but I can't. It flew over the river to Stanleigh, last June. It is perfectly beautiful, and we want it dreadfully; but we want the real victory still more. And we'll have it, too, if I can manage it."

The visitor, looking at the determined young face before her, felt that Fairmount's chances of ultimate success must be pretty good, if the same spirit animated all the crew.

When the cup departed from Fairmount for a sojourn of a year, possibly forever, at Stanleigh, Mary had taken the defeat very much to heart, even though she realized that it had reflected no discredit upon the crew, or upon herself, its captain. Just a week before the great race Beth had been summarily ordered to join her father and her new mother in a Mediterranean tour. Her departure robbed the crew of its very best oar. Then, to prove the truth of the old adage that misfortunes never come singly, on the day before the race Belle had slipped upon the landing when the girls were pulling in their boat after practice, spraining her right wrist. It was not a serious sprain, but it rendered her absolutely useless to the crew. And, as a crowning misfortune, the two substitutes from the secondary crew completely lost their

heads over their unexpected advancement, just when they should have been cool and collected. The result was — the empty pedestal.

But discouraged though she was, Mary's resolve to win back the cup had not once wavered. Even then, though the autumn was only half gone, she had chosen her crew with care and deliberation, determined to make it the strongest crew the Academy had ever presented for the annual contest. Practice upon the river had already begun, to be continued in the gymnasium "boat" during the winter. In fancy she once more beheld the shining cup upon the pedestal before her, and her frowning contemplation changed to a look of elation.

While she stood in the great bay window lost in thought, Miss Horton passed through the hall, and looked at her in surprise, wondering what she found so engrossing. Mary was such an active girl, always eagerly intent upon some plan for work or play, that this unusual quiet attracted her attention.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mary!" she said gently.

Miss Horton always welcomed the opportunity for a quiet chat with one of her pupils. It was then that they opened their hearts to her, and she learned more of a girl's innermost thoughts, her ambitions, discouragements and successes, than in a much longer talk with two or three together.

In this warm personal interest which she took in each scholar individually, lay the secret of her success and the success of her school.

Mary turned with a start, at the sound of the kindly voice.

"You were so many miles away," Miss Horton went on, smilingly, "that I hesitated to recall you."

"I was with the crew, on the river," Mary answered whimsically. "How I detest this pedestal, when it is empty, I mean. Of course, when it held our beautiful 'Victory' it was perfect; but now —"

"Now," Miss Horton filled in the doleful pause, "now it is bringing joy to the Stanleigh girls. Don't you think that is a good view to take of it?"

"I suppose so," was the hesitating reply; "but we'll win it back again next June; we must win it! They'll have enough joy by that time!"

Accustomed as she was to girlish exaggeration, Miss Horton was startled at the vehemence of the tone.

"You have the crew's success very much at heart, I know," she said quietly, searching the young face before her as she spoke. "As captain, you naturally would feel as you do, but do not put too much value upon prizes to be won. Honest effort, even though it be unsuccessful, is often

far more valuable than any prize. Will you remember that, dear? ”

“ I will,” Mary promised gravely. “ Do you know, Miss Horton, this pedestal reminds me of some people’s lives. It is strong and beautiful, but it lacks something to complete it.”

“ Some lives are crowned and do not know it,” Miss Horton answered, entering into the girl’s serious mood in her sympathetic way. “ While they are striving for a shining silver trophy, they may be wearing an ever-growing crown like this,” pointing to the graceful vine before her: “ so do not despise the simple green crown, even if it is not as brilliant as the silver one. And remember that a victory over self is a victory indeed. Where were you bound when the pedestal detained you? ”

“ For the Country Club. I’m playing in the final match to-day. Mrs. Armstrong-Stafford is hostess.” Mary made a queer little face as she gave the lady’s name, and Miss Horton with difficulty suppressed a smile. “ My opponent is a niece of hers from Boston, I believe. The tournament has simmered down to our match. They say she travels with an extra trunk filled with her prizes, so I’m afraid I am in for defeat. And I did so want to win the prize, Miss Horton.”

“ What is the prize? ” Miss Horton asked, wondering why a girl like Mary, with everything heart

could wish, should be so anxious over a simple little token.

"Oh! I don't know," Mary replied indifferently. "A pin, I believe. It doesn't matter what it is; I want to win."

"I wish you all success," was the quiet reply. "Do not forget what I said, though. There are victories, glorious ones, that bring no prizes whatever."

"I won't forget," Mary answered softly. "Good-by!"

The conversation recurred to her as she mounted the high seat of the trap, and was whirled swiftly down the drive. Once out on the avenue leading to the spacious grounds of the Country Club, her entire attention was engrossed by Dot, the high-spirited little mare.

"So you want to run, do you?" Mary spoke to the animal in the caressing tones of a real lover of horses. She was a thorough horsewoman, and could handle the ribbons of a four-in-hand as easily as some girls drive the family nag. "All right! Here's a good, clear stretch. Sit tight, Peter!" she admonished the old coachman, as she gave Dot her head, and they flew swiftly along the wide avenue, only checking speed when they turned in at the great gates of the club. As they drew up at the steps of the clubhouse Mary was greeted by a chorus of gay voices. She

waved her whip in acknowledgment of the greeting.

"In good form to-day, I hope," Colonel Arnold whispered anxiously, as he helped her from the trap. "I hear your opponent has never lost a match. Let us hope this one will be the exception. Boston is all right, as far as brains and beans go, but for golf, give me New York in general, and Fairmount's champion in particular!"

"Thank you, Colonel!" Mary replied gratefully. "I'll do my best, you may depend upon that. Why, hello, Jackie!" she greeted the small caddie who had importantly taken possession of her golf-bag, and was beaming up at her in eager expectation of this very greeting. "Do we win to-day?"

"Betchyerlife!" was Jackie's enthusiastic if inelegant reply, given in one breath. "If that there lady gits ahead of us, she'll have to git up before breakfast!"

"There's a package in my bag, Jackie, that might interest you," Mary whispered to her devoted attendant.

"Thank you, ma'am!" the youngster answered, as he unbuckled the ball-pocket. He had noted, with practiced eye, its unusual bulge, and had already taken account of stock from the outside.

"Um-m! Pep'mints!" he exclaimed jubilantly, as he verified this previous conclusion. "Goody!"

"Jackie's a strong partisan," Mary said, laugh-

ing heartily at the boy's delight. "It is genuinely helpful to have him so."

"He's not the only strong partisan."

The speaker was a tall boy in the handsome gray uniform of Eustis Military Academy. He spoke in a low tone intended for Mary's ear alone.

"Oh! how do you do, Lorimer," she said, greeting him with outstretched hand. The two were firm friends; and their friendship was cemented by their mutual love for the good old Scotch game.

"Say, Mary," the boy went on, his serious manner causing the girl to gaze at him in surprise, "look here! if I tell you something — something important — will you regard it as strictly confidential?"

"Why, certainly, Lorimer," Mary assured him gravely. The two drew farther away from the gay, chattering throng around them.

"I hate to tell you," Lorimer began, when they had ensconced themselves on a bench in the angle formed by the steps and the piazza, "but I must, because it's only fair to you. Your opponent, Miss Gardiner, is —"

"Oh! I know!" Mary interrupted lightly. "I'm prepared, Lorimer. Her reputation has preceded her. Her aunt has been her herald, and a mighty blast of the trumpets has resulted. She's won right along in this tournament, too, so she must



“‘NO! I’M NOT MISTAKEN!’ LORIMER PROCEEDED STUBBORNLY.”

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be a pretty strong player. She has never lost a match, they say. This will be my Waterloo!"

"That's all right," the boy went on, soberly, "if it's a straight Waterloo." He put significant emphasis upon the adjective. "But if it is crooked —"

"What!" Mary rose to her feet as she uttered the startled exclamation.

"I mean just that," the boy said grimly. "If that girl wins fairly, it's all right; but if she don't —" His fists clinched ominously. "My brother — the one in Harvard — suspected something when his fiancée played against her at her club near Boston. He was caddying that day. Then when I watched a tournament there afterwards, I was on my guard, and I saw her caddie deliberately kick her ball! It was the last hole, and a very close match."

"But she couldn't help that," Mary expostulated. "Probably she —"

"She saw it too!" the boy interrupted positively.

"Oh, no! surely not!" Mary contradicted, in genuine distress. "You must be mistaken."

"No! I'm not mistaken!" Lorimer persisted stubbornly. "Of course it's hard for a girl like you to believe it, but it's true."

Mary flushed at the unconscious compliment, but said nothing.

"I'm going to follow every foot of the play this morning, — with the ball, not with the gallery," he went on determinedly. "I'd know her balls anywhere."

"How?"

"Because I examined them. I gave that little brother of hers — her caddie — a quarter to get some candy and chewing-gum, and I held her bag while he went to the clubhouse for it. She has her individual mark on her balls — a red star set in a red wreath, with a blue G. on the star. She's the star, I suppose, and that's her laurel wreath! There were several new balls and one old one in the pocket. I'm going to make it my business to see that she finishes with the same ball she uses in her last drive. I don't care!" in answer to the look of shocked surprise on Mary's face. "You've just got to be tricky when you deal with some people. If she's all right it won't hurt her a bit, but if she isn't —" He left the rest of the sentence to the imagination.

"I'm telling you this to put you on your guard," he explained earnestly. "We fellows are all anxious to have you win. You've put up a dandy game in this tournament, and you don't try to take an advantage just because you're a girl. I've never seen a player anywhere that drives off better than you do, and I've played in ever so many different clubs. I hope I haven't upset you by telling you this?"

Mary laughed aloud at his anxious tone.

“No indeed!” she assured him gaily. “I’ve never felt more in the mood for conquest in my life. Bring on the giant — giantess, I should say — and let me slay her!”

They separated with a laughing handclasp of good-fellowship, Mary to meet her opponent and enter the fray, and Lorimer to follow the contest with determined oversight.

CHAPTER VII

THE FINISH OF THE TOURNAMENT

FAIRMOUNT ACADEMY, with its splendid gymnasium, swimming pool, and squash and tennis courts, was minus golf links, because its grounds, beautiful as they were, were not extensive enough. But the girls were cordially welcomed as members of the Country Club, so the golf enthusiasts never felt the lack.

The course at the club was a fine one of eighteen holes, perfectly kept, while the clubhouse itself was as well equipped as any in the country. Contrary to the custom in most clubs, each Saturday was Ladies' Day. Possibly this pleasing departure from the usual masculine preëmption of the links on that day, was due to the fact that so many of the club members came from Stanleigh Hall and Fairmount Academy, and could find little time to play on other days during the school term, while for the three months' vacation, they never appeared at all.

Each Ladies' Day one or the other of the neighboring matrons was in charge as hostess, so that Miss Horton felt perfectly safe in trusting her girls

to go without a teacher as chaperon. Mary availed herself of the privilege of the club most often. She was a born golf player, or so Duncan, the old Scotchman who "owned" the links, declared. Unfortunately, on the day of the match, poor old Duncan was hobbling painfully about his little lodge at the entrance to the grounds, bent almost double with rheumatism, else his watchful eye might have changed the course of events, or at least have relieved Lorimer Van Pelt of part of his self-assumed burden as referee.

On this particular Saturday, Mrs. T. Armstrong-Stafford held sway. Mary frankly detested this hyphenated lady, in spite of her gushing sweetness of manner. She herself was so simple and sincere, so bluntly straightforward, that Mrs. Armstrong-Stafford fairly grated upon her finer sensibilities. Mary disliked her over-trimmed gowns — the lady affected Frenchy "creations" — her elaborate coiffures, and amazing head-gear, and most of all her exaggeratedly friendly attitude.

Possibly the lady realized Mary's feelings towards her, for it is hard to disguise genuine dislike, and resented them; possibly it was simply lack of tact which dictated her introduction of the two participants in the match.

"Good morning! good morning!" she exclaimed, bustling up to Mary and kissing her upon either cheek. "Charming day, isn't it, love?"

Come with me this instant, you naughty girlie, and meet my niece. Miss Gardiner — Miss Livingston! Two such lovely girls ought to know each other."

The girls acknowledged the gushing presentation by formal bows. Although they had both been playing in the tournament, they had not, until now, seen each other except at long range. Each girl realized that her opponent for this final match represented "the survival of the fittest." They examined each other with furtive interest.

Mary saw a tall, languid, blonde young lady, who by no stretch of the imagination could be called a girl, who bore herself as though life was hardly worth living. Her voice, when she finally consented to use it, proved to be really sweet, but her affected, drawling manner effectually eclipsed its sweetness.

"I am so sorry you have to play off this match," Mrs. Armstrong-Stafford informed Mary, in her over-emphasized manner.

"Why?" queried Mary, greatly surprised. "We have to finish the tournament."

"Yes, I know, dear, but it is scarcely fair to put you against this young lady, is it, sweetheart?" she asked, turning to her niece for corroboration.

"Sweetheart" smiled demurely but did not commit herself.

"Of course I know you play a good game," the lady went on amicably, "but Geraldine here has an unblemished record, an unbroken succession of victories, haven't you, love?"

"Oh, yes! I always win!" was the indifferent reply. "But then, I play so much, you know. I am out now: I came out last winter. You are just a school-girl, aren't you? I hope you have had sufficient practice to make the game interesting. Of course I know you have won so far in the tournament, but that might have been luck."

Mary was speechless with surprise, for a moment. Such grand assurance! such a patronizing manner! This was a new species to her. Involuntarily the thought flashed through her mind that a few months at Fairmount might benefit the young lady before her. It wouldn't take the girls long, she thought, to prick her armor of self-esteem. Boarding-schools are wonderful levelers! And how the prickers would enjoy the process! She laughed at the picture it brought before her.

"I beg your pardon!" she said; "I—I was thinking of something else. Yes, I'm still in school, Miss Gardiner. I love it too much to want to leave it yet awhile."

"Love it! Fancy! How queer!" Miss Gardiner vouchsafed in her wearied accents. "A blue-stocking?" she ventured sarcastically.

"Oh, no!" Mary mischievously pretended

not to understand, and extended her slender foot with its stout little rubber-soled tan tie, showing a section of tan stocking above it. As she said to the girls, later, in recounting the day's experience: "She treated me as though I were Chick-a-dee's age, so I acted like it."

Her inquisitor shrugged her shoulders, and cast a glance of amused disdain towards her aunt, but the latter understood Mary better, and realized that she was not as deeply impressed as she pretended to be. As the party moved towards the steps, the lady spoke to her niece in a tactful whisper loud enough to be overheard by several bystanders, as well as by Mary herself.

"Good-by, dearie! I'll have the prize all ready for you. It is beautiful, beautiful! I chose it myself. You see I knew what you wanted. Good-by, and good luck!"

Mrs. Armstrong-Stafford herself never accompanied the players. As a tennis or golf exponent she was not a success, and even the milder game of croquet was too strenuous for her taste. She preferred to shine on the club piazza, where her long, trailing garments could sweep about without fear of contamination with earth or turf; or to preside at the club tea-table, where her exertions could by no chance disarrange the shining puffs or disturb the youthful pink and white of her artistic complexion.

The very instant the play started, Miss Gardiner's blasé manner dropped from her like a garment. She set to work with a cool precision which proved her no mean antagonist.

"Surely such playing ought to win, without the need of anything else," was the thought which flashed through Mary's mind, as she watched her dislodge her ball with telling effect, from a particularly bad lie in a bunker. It was not long, however, before she discovered the flaw in her opponent's armor: her drives, while long, were not true in direction.

Mary herself had spoken the truth when she assured the Colonel that she was in good form. In her putting she seldom wasted a shot, but her drives were her strong point. Miss Gardiner had heard old Duncan's opinion of Mary's playing. She soon realized that the canny Scotsman knew what he was talking about: Mary was a born golf player. The realization robbed her of the last vestige of that easy assurance with which she had begun the game.

So evenly were the two players matched — every gain from Mary's splendid drives being offset by Miss Gardiner's expert handling of the brassie and irons through the fair green — that they approached the eighteenth tee with the score tied, the chances for victory as strong for one as for the other. It was a very exciting time. The gallery

swung back and forth in its predictions like an erratic pendulum. Courtesy to a club guest warred with its pride in its own youthful champion.

The younger club members were hoping fervently that Mary would win. They had had a taste of Miss Gardiner's "high-flown airs," as Lorimer expressed it, which had made a decidedly bad impression upon them. Even Colonel Arnold himself, who had learned to play golf on a celebrated Scotch links, with a famous professional as teacher, had been politely but firmly informed that he was mistaken about a mooted point. Truly Miss Gardiner was no respecter of persons!

"It will do that girl good if she loses," one of the Eustis boys whispered to his chum. "She's too cock-sure! Did you ever see such wild drives in your life? For a crack player, I mean. They are long enough, but oh my! If she makes another like those she made from the sixteenth and seventeenth, she's done for!"

There was a breathless hush as Mary drove off from the last tee. It was a splendid drive, long, low and straight! The ball bounded several times, then rolled into a small clover patch, insuring a good lie, and affording a fair chance to make the green on the next stroke.

"Fine!" muttered the Colonel in deep satisfaction.

Then there followed a second exciting moment

while Miss Gardiner selected a new ball and deliberately addressed it. Lorimer's chum watched her intently, but Lorimer himself was nowhere to be seen. After a breathless wait, Miss Gardiner drove off, a tremendously long drive, but — not in the direction of the last hole.

"That settles it!" one cadet whispered to another, with satisfied certainty. "That pull behind the hill into the rocks puts her out of it."

Yet when the player, backed up by most of the gallery, reached the hazard, they found Miss Gardiner's caddie standing by the ball, which was in excellent position for the next stroke. They were astonished, but concluded that the ball had hit the rocks in the hazard and bounded on to the fair green, — one of those lucky accidents that sometimes befall a player.

Then followed a good shot on Miss Gardiner's part which placed her ball well on to the putting green. Mary's approach was also well played, but Miss Gardiner, by a long put, sent her ball straight into the hole, while Mary took two puts, thus losing the match by one down.

Mary shut her lips into a straight, white line, as she saw her opponent's ball drop into the cup. One more shot and the victory would have been hers. One more shot! Then she rallied, and offered the conventional words of congratulation to her successful opponent. But her speech sounded hard,

even to herself, and she turned away at the first possible moment, to join the Colonel, making a heroic effort to smile easily as she received his sincere condolences. It was a tremulous smile, not at all a trustworthy one, and Mary realized anxiously that not far behind the hard brightness of her eyes, bitter tears were struggling to appear.

"Never mind, Miss Mary," the Colonel began sympathetically, patting her hand in his fatherly way. "This was so little of a defeat that it scarcely counts. You never played a finer game in your life, my child, never! I think the description of it will do more for old Duncan's rheumatism than all his medicines. He thinks each triumph of yours belongs to him."

"Triumph!" Mary repeated scornfully. "I don't see much 'triumph' about this! I beg your pardon?" turning to Miss Gardiner, who had hurried to overtake her.

"You play a very fair game for a school-girl," Miss Gardiner remarked, with languid superiority. "Very fair, indeed!"

"Thank you!" Mary's eyes flashed fire at the irritating tone of the remark, but she quickly gained control of herself. "I try to play a fair game."

In spite of her utmost endeavor there was the faintest emphasis upon the adjective, but it passed

unnoticed. The party strolled on, animatedly discussing the match and commenting on various shots. Just as they reached the piazza, Lorimer Van Pelt hurriedly caught up with them, and touched Miss Gardiner on the arm.

"Pardon me. May I detain you a moment?"

The others trooped up the steps as she turned to him expectantly. A good-looking lad in military uniform, bashfully eager to offer congratulations, as she supposed, was not to be despised. Even luncheon could wait.

"What is it?" she drawled sweetly. "You wish to speak to me, Mr. Van Pelt?"

"This belongs to you, doesn't it?" He held a ball in his outstretched hand, a new ball, bearing her chosen insignia, the wreath-surrounded star, with its dark blue G.

"Oh, yes! Thank you! I don't like to lose one of my balls. They are quite expensive, you know. Besides, this is a new one. I always order them marked in this way. Clever design, don't you think so? See!"

"The laurel wreath for victory?" he questioned.

"Perhaps," she admitted, favoring him with a smile and a coy glance from half-closed eyes.

"You used a new ball for your last drive, did you not?" he asked, trying to keep his angry voice under control.

"Yes, indeed," she informed him gaily. "It's

a superstition of mine. I always use a new ball at the last tee. Silly, isn't it? "

" But you finished with this ball," he replied sternly, producing a battered specimen from his pocket. " This was the ball that dropped into the last cup."

He spoke slowly, never taking his eyes from hers. A hot flush suffused her face for a moment, then, by an effort, she recovered her self-possession. She began to realize that it was no bashful flatterer before her, but a stern young judge.

" Probably a mistake of Johnnie's," she said lightly, dismissing the matter with a laugh. " He's my small brother, you know, who caddies for me. He must have decided to substitute the old ball at the last moment."

" Yes, he did!" Lorimer went on, resolutely ignoring her attempt to end the conversation and join the others, who had gone on into the club dining-room: " he decided after your last drive! It certainly was a mistake of Johnnie's, a serious mistake. He lost the new ball which you used in that drive, but he found this ball. The one you are holding," pointing significantly to the new ball in her hand, " was in a hopelessly bad lie."

" I'm sure you are mistaken," she declared shortly.

" No, I regret to say that I am not mistaken," the boy asserted hotly. " My friend saw you use

a new ball — you acknowledge that yourself — yet this old ball was in at the finish. I chose a vantage point on the side of the hazard — ”

“ What? ” she interrupted in sharp astonishment.

“ I chose it purposely, because — ”

“ Well, because — ” she drawled provokingly, as Lorimer hesitated, flushing uncomfortably.

“ Because I wanted to be sure of the position of your ball after the last drive, that’s why! And I was sure! It fell into a clump of bushes where I found it later. But I saw your brother drop another ball into good position, without any pretence of looking for the one you had driven.”

“ Well? ” Miss Gardiner looked him straight in the face, and demanded defiantly: “ What do you propose to do about it? ”

The boy’s eyes never wavered, but his face grew pale and set.

“ What are you going to do about it? ” he asked with a quiet persistence that she found most disconcerting.

“ Nothing! ” she replied nonchalantly. “ If my brother has made a mistake — and I am not at all sure that he did — ”

“ But I am! ” he interrupted her decisively.

“ — it is to be regretted, that’s all,” she finished, ignoring the interruption. “ He’s only a small boy, remember. Besides, I probably would have won in any case.”

“You couldn’t have won,” Lorimer asserted fiercely; “not as the balls lay after that last drive! You couldn’t have made it! And I won’t have Mary — Miss Livingston lose in this way.”

“Oh! so that’s it! A squire of dames! I salute you! But it’s too late now, I fear, to prove anything, even for dear Mary’s sake,” she ended with an aggravating laugh, as she ran up the steps. “A tempest in a teapot! A new version of ‘much ado about nothing!’ Won’t you come in to lunch, Mr. Ferret? I beg your pardon: possibly that isn’t your name. I remember, now; but it seemed so appropriate!” She ended with a second mocking laugh, and waved her hand gaily, then sauntered into the clubhouse.

Lorimer marched back and forth, biting his lip hard in an effort to keep from springing after her and telling his story to the people in the dining-room. He knew that she had cheated, or at least had connived at the fraud, and the knowledge made him savage. But what could he do? His hands were tied! He naturally hesitated before making such a grave charge against a guest of the club — a girl, at that! Even if he should speak of the matter, they would feel sure that there had been a mistake. No wonder Miss Gardiner remained airily indifferent; she evidently realized to the full the strength of her position. Then, too, the boy had matched trickery with trickery, and he

was not proud of his deceit. Neither was he at all anxious to explain that he had made friends with the young lady's brother on purpose to send him for the candy while he examined the contents of her golf-bag! Yet he felt justified in the deception, and in his oversight.

At that moment Mary came slowly down the steps. He hailed her excitedly, and gave her a full account of his discovery.

"I know it," she remarked quietly, at the close of his angry recital. "I knew it at the time, because the direction of her last drive could hardly have placed her ball where she found it, unless she uses some sort of a modified boomerang!"

"But what shall we do about it?" Lorimer questioned anxiously.

"Nothing!"

"Nothing?" his voice rose to a high register of amazed inquiry. "Nothing? Let her keep the prize, and go on bragging about always winning? Why, it's stealing, as well as cheating! That prize belongs to you, and the victory is yours, too!"

Miss Horton's words in their conversation that morning stood out clearly before Mary's mental vision. Unconsciously she quoted them in answer.

"There are victories, glorious ones, that bring no prizes whatever. I know I won, and I am satisfied. The club people have always been good to me, and I cannot bear to make trouble, or even

unpleasantness. But I thank you more than I can say, Lorimer, for your kindness."

Big tears stood in her eyes as she finished. The sight of them, for Mary was not a "teary" girl, upset the boy.

"I'll tell it to every one I know," he began hotly. "I'll make her sorry for this or —"

"You'll keep it a secret, Lorimer," Mary contradicted flatly. "You'll not breathe one word, not even a whisper, of this affair, from now on, forever more, so there! Promise me, please! You will, if you value my friendship as I do yours," she ended gently, with hand outstretched invitingly. The lad hesitated, frowned savagely, then grasped the slender hand so hard that Mary winced.

"You're a wonder!" he said admiringly. "Yes, sir! a wonder! You're certainly different from most girls. I'll drop it for your sake, but I don't want to do it."

The two walked slowly up to the piazza just as Mrs. Armstrong-Stafford emerged from the clubhouse, evidently in search of them.

"Come in, young people," she said smilingly. "Come in to lunch. We are waiting for you. Just a moment, though, dear. Excuse us, Lorimer; I want to have word with this sweet child. My niece, the dear girl, is so conscientious, she fears that she may have had an unfair advantage in the match to-day. She has played on some of the best

links in the country, you know, dearie, while you are, in a way, a novice; so the sweet thing insists that you accept the prize. She absolutely refuses to take it, in spite of all I can say."

"Thank you, Mrs. Armstrong-Stafford," Mary answered gravely, "but I, too, refuse to accept it. I made a good score, the best I've ever made, and I am satisfied. Will you excuse me if I do not go in to the luncheon, please? I — I — have a headache."

When Peter drove up with the trap, in answer to Lorimer's summons, Mary found Colonel Arnold already installed in the driver's seat.

"May I accompany you?" he asked, with a boyish laugh. "Possession is nine points of the law, you know. I have placed my motor at the guest's disposal: she wishes to make the two-thirty for town. Besides, I have a word or two for Miss Horton's ears."

Mary regarded him suspiciously but he offered no further explanation, and just then Lorimer came down the steps to see her off.

"Remember!" she reminded him in an urgent whisper, as he shook hands with her at parting.

"Sure!" came the boyish reply, accompanied by a reassuring pressure of the hand.

The drive home was very quiet. Mary was tired and disinclined to talk, and the Colonel respected her mood. As he helped her to alight under the

Academy's porte-cochère, he broke the silence for the first time.

“Lorimer was not the only one who made discoveries this morning,” he informed her quietly. “Under such peculiar circumstances it is hard to know what course is best. It seems wrong to condone so flagrant an act of dishonesty — it is wrong — yet possibly — I’m all at sea. I really do not know what to do. I do — not — know!”

“Lorimer has promised to do nothing,” Mary said earnestly. “He’s a dear boy.”

“And I know a dear girl,” the Colonel answered, smiling into the grave young face before him.

“Thank you, Colonel,” Mary replied simply.

CHAPTER VIII

INVITATIONS

BETH found a dainty little note which caused her much surprise, among her letters one morning. It was not signed, and the handwriting was unfamiliar, but as it was marked "Strictly Confidential" she was debarred from talking it over with the other girls. It read:

"MY DEAR MISS CARTER: I know you are a musician but — are you addicted to comb solos? Address your answer to 'Music,' and leave it in the office until called for."

Beth's answer was short and to the point: "No!"

The next day a second note was found in her mail. This, too, was anonymous, and she could find no clue to the writer. She began to enjoy the joke.

"Do you think you ever will take up comb music, or any similar nerve-racking instrument? Answer as before."

Beth's second reply was equally terse: "Never!"

The third letter was more to the point. It began very formally, but changed its mind towards the finish.

“ Miss Elisabeth Carter is invited to take up her permanent abode in Room 24, Fairmount Academy, on and after October Twenty-fifth. By accepting this invitation she will confer a lasting favor upon the undersigned.

“ MARY LIVINGSTON.

“ P. S. Miss Horton says it's all right, so do come. We can have lots of fun. We'll make No. 17 look to its laurels, won't we? I have a lovely new pillow for Tinker.”

On the same day that this was received a number of the girls also received notes from Mary, which were as much of an enigma to them as Beth's had been to her. The notes were written upon dainty white cards in the most approved and formal manner. Beth, too, found one of them enclosed in her other note.

“ Miss Mary Livingston requests the pleasure of your company at a private view, Room 24, Fairmount Academy, October Twenty-fifth, at 3.30 P. M.

“ NOTE. The Work of Art on exhibition is a very expensive production. It has been 'hung' in a private gallery for some months.”

There was much conjecture over these cards. Some of the girls even ventured to question the "artist," but she remained absolutely non-committal.

"Of course it's some joke," Belle declared, "but she's taken enough trouble over it, whatever it is."

"Mary's been acting queer ever since school opened," Grace said thoughtfully. "You know how she loves all sorts of outdoor exercise, yet she's refused several times, lately, and spent the time in her room with her 'engaged' sign up. Why, she even missed the rest of the games in the golf tournament. That was why she never really met Miss Gardiner until the very day of the final match. When I asked her about it she just said she was busy and couldn't spare time for frivolity! Did you ever? I don't understand it."

"Do you suppose she is really painting?" Beth asked, in awestruck tones. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if she should turn out to be a great artist? We'd all be so proud because we are her friends."

"Yes, and when you become a great singer," Belle went on with the "castles in Spain," "we'll all be equally proud to think that we once knew you intimately. I shall be especially puffed up, because I started you upon your musical career."

There was a merry laugh at the remembrance

of how mischievous Belle had induced Beth to sing a solo in Assembly, one morning, when the latter had first entered Fairmount.

"You had the same start," Beth retorted promptly, referring to Belle's own solo, or attempt at one, the following morning, which was Miss Horton's punishment for the joke. "I remember even now," Beth shuddered realistically, "the dulcet tones in which you sang that hymn!"

Beth had sought refuge near the door before she began her little taunt, but, for once, her precaution was unnecessary: Belle ignored it.

"I cannot sing, I cannot play,
But on the comb I hold full sway!"

she improvised rapidly. "This is the day of the specialist, and comb music is not at all common. Shall I play something for you now? What do you prefer?"

"All rests!" Beth answered. "Spare us, oh! spare us, kind lady! You know how it affects Tinker's nerves. If you have no pity upon us, at least consider him, the poor defenseless creature!"

"Let's get even with Mary for her mystery by pretending that we are really going to a private view," Belle suggested. "I intend to borrow Miss Bronson's lorgnette, if she'll lend it to me. One cannot properly inspect artistic creations," she went on, in a high-pitched affected drawl,

“without the aid of one’s lorgnette. One needs it to appreciate the atmosphere, the play of light and shade, the high lights, don’t you know. My taste inclines to the impressionistic school of art.”

“Where did you hear all that?” Beth demanded curiously. “By the way, I received another invitation, that I accepted with great pleasure. I’ll soon know whether Mary is preparing for an artistic career, because I am to take up a permanent abode in number twenty-four. We intend to make it the Mecca for the wit and beauty of Fairmount,” she went on teasingly. “People who have raved over number seventeen will rave no longer: its day is done! The immediate future will witness the ‘passing of the third floor back,’ I mean the second floor front! Our great drawing cards will be art, and music, and that nameless tact which all successful hostesses have possessed from time immemorial. We —”

But she found herself without an audience, so she reserved the rest of her harangue for future use.

On the day set for the “private view” the fortunate ones gathered in number seventeen promptly at 3.15 ready to march to the “studio” in a body. They had borrowed or manufactured trailing gowns and huge hats, and several of them were using lorgnettes with telling effect. As the half-hour struck and they swept imposingly to

their destination, they looked not unlike a typical society gathering.

Mary started when she opened the door and beheld the formidable array; but, not to be outdone, she greeted them with gushing welcome. The room was very dark when they entered, too dark to view any picture, however fine, but as soon as all were seated, and were languidly conversing about the weather, and other original subjects, Mary let the shades fly up as far as they would go. The radiance of the autumn sunshine, flooding in, caused the guests to blink involuntarily. Then there was a chorus of exclamations. All languor vanished: the cherished lorgnettes were allowed to swing unheeded from their chains. The society dames became "just girls" once more.

"Oh! How lovely!" "What a perfect room!" "Where did you get the idea?" "And all new furniture, too!"

"New furniture?" Mary repeated, beaming with delight at the success of her surprise. "Oh, yes! Very new! Why, don't any of you remember?"

"Remember what?" questioned several voices.

"Remember this furniture. Belle ought, certainly."

"I do!" Belle declared suddenly. "I helped buy this furniture by the sweat of my brow."

Excuse me, ladies; I mean perspiration! At the Coolidge auction, over a year ago. It's Ethel Coolidge's mahogany! Where has it been all this time, Mary? I had completely forgotten it."

"Well, I hadn't," Mary replied significantly. "I wasn't allowed to forget it!"

"What are you talking about?" one of the other girls asked curiously. "Do tell us, too."

"That's so, you were not here then. You see," Mary explained eagerly, "father sent me a hundred dollars for my birthday present, and told me to get something sensible with it. That was just at the time the Coolidges were going abroad to live, so I consulted Miss Horton and decided to try to buy some of their handsome mahogany furniture for my room. When I spoke to Mrs. Coolidge about it, she said that they intended to store everything; but they must have changed their minds quite suddenly, because the first I heard of the auction was on the very day set for it. I happened to be down for a game at the Country Club with one of the Stanleigh girls that day, so I couldn't get away, but Belle agreed to go for me."

"Yes, I agreed," Belle remarked resignedly, "because I couldn't help myself. That day was a record-breaker! The thermometer struck, and the quicksilver tried to escape from the top of the

tube. I remember! I remember!" Belle fanned herself excitedly, as though even the memory of it made her warm.

"Then came the funny part," Mary went on; "only it didn't seem so funny then. When I reached the club I found that my match had been postponed, so I coaxed Colonel Arnold to take me to the auction. In the meantime Ethel Coolidge had decided to put off her trip, and bid in the things she knew I wanted. She did! And Belle did! And I did! We all bid strenuously — against each other!"

"But couldn't you see each other, or recognize the voices?" Edie questioned.

"See each other? The crowd was dense! As for voices, some man bid for Belle, the Colonel spoke for me, and Mr. Coolidge's secretary did the same for Ethel. Well, I got the furniture, but —" the pause spoke volumes.

"It must have cost ever so much more than a hundred dollars!" hazarded Beth.

"It did," Mary answered grimly. "And Miss Horton refused to let me ask father for one cent more. She wouldn't even let me see the things until I had finished paying for them. All this time, months and months, these works of art have been 'hung' in one of the attics. They are really my works, because I paid every dollar of their price over my gift money from my allowance.

I guess I've learned my lesson pretty thoroughly: I'll never, never, never, spend a cent again unless I have it, all my own. No, sir! never!"

After that the girls admired the charming room to Mary's heart's content. The walls had been done in a soft *écru*, with a frieze of carefully arranged posters cut from the covers of magazines. It made a really effective combination, as the pictures chosen were good ones, and the plain paper formed an excellent background. The curtains were simply *écru* muslin with a stenciled border of green leaves. These, and a few gay pillows, kept the general effect of the rich mahogany from being too sombre.

The room itself was a pretty one. An alcove held the beds, and was separated from the rest of the room by portières of soft-toned canvas which matched the drapery at the windows, and hung in plain straight folds; while a large dressing-closet, fitted with a stationary stand, helped the room to present the appearance of a sitting-room rather than a bedroom. This dressing-closet was not "on view" however. The guests learned why, later.

"I am examining it all with a proprietary interest," Beth remarked complacently. "Mary wouldn't let me in before."

"You are in luck, I think," Edie assured her, almost enviously.

"I know it. I've never tried to furnish my room with things of my own, except for a few pillows and a little drapery. It isn't a particularly choice room, anyway — just an uninteresting little square box. You remember, I didn't like Fairmount at first; I can hardly believe it now but I didn't; and since I've changed my views I've been waiting for a nicer room. Now I am satisfied."

"So am I," Mary sang out cheerfully. "Only one thing was worrying me, but I have your signed statement about that, so it's all right."

"What was it?" questioned Belle; "Tinker?"

"No, indeed. Tinky-wink was an added inducement. It was a certain class of musical endeavor which doesn't appeal to me, but Beth has foresworn it forever and ever. Move in to-night, Beth, won't you? There's a method in my madness, girls. With all these valuable works of art about," waving her hand airily towards her pictured frieze, "and all this priceless mahogany — 'nothin' like it outside of Mt. Vernon, itself, ladies an' gents!' — I must have some protection. The New York idea of putting up a card in the window announcing that the house is protected by some burglar alarm appealed to me; so at great expense, I have made arrangements for the protection of number twenty-four."

She gravely produced a large card which she

swung outside the door from a small hook usually reserved for the "Engaged" sign.

Protected by Carter's Self-Acting Canine Alarm.

You pull his tail; he does the rest.

The girls laughed heartily at the absurd poster, while Grace said quietly to Belle: "Mary seems to fairly effervesce this afternoon, don't she?"

"I think you'd effervesce, too," Mary retorted, overhearing the low-toned remark, "if you had been economizing as hard as I have. No ice-cream sodas, no chocolates, no concerts or matinées, no anything that's jolly. And not for a week or two, remember, but for months! M-o-n-t-h-s! When I die, you won't find 'Calais' written on my heart, like that English queen; you'll probably find 'mahogany!' I'll never forget —"

She stopped suddenly as she remembered something she had completely forgotten.

"How careless I am! Why didn't you remind me?"

"Remind you of what?" Beth asked quickly.

"Why, the tea; only it isn't tea to-day."

"Oh!" Belle sighed audibly. "I feel so relieved! Every time you moved I thought it was coming, and with each disappointment my hopes grew fainter and fainter, and so did I! Somebody help her; I can't wait much longer."

“Too bad about you!” Mary remarked in sarcastic pity. “As this is such a great occasion, like burning a mortgage, or inheriting a million, I decided to treat you to — guess!”

“Chocolate!” “Cake!” “Pie!” “Cider!”

“No! you are all wrong! It’s —” she motioned to Beth and the two disappeared into the dressing-closet as she spoke, leaving the guests in a state of anxious expectation, uncertain whether satisfying substance, or an unsatisfying joke was to follow. But her prompt reëntry with a large brick of ice-cream, followed by Beth bearing a plate heaped high with macaroons, relieved their anxiety.

They set to work on the dainties with a will, too busy, at first, even to talk. Nothing was heard save the clink of spoons, and the crunching of the crisp cakes, until Beth suddenly consulted her watch and sprang up with a surprised exclamation, leaving a bit of her ice-cream unfinished. It is one of Nature’s laws that nothing is wasted, and in this case Tinker obligingly acted as the good dame’s agent. In fact, by the time he had gone the rounds, the plates looked so clean and shining that Mary hurried to put them under the hot-water faucet, fearful that she might yield to the temptation, and pack them away unwashed.

“After five o’clock!” Beth announced. “If

I am to move to-night, I must get some studying done before dinner. Good-by, love," she said sweetly, as she sailed up to her hostess with hand upraised. "It has been a chawming view, very, very chawming, I assure you. I'll see you at the reception to-night, I trust? Au revoir! Au revoir!"

"S. Y. L." was Mary's enigmatic response, which, translated, meant that she hoped to have the pleasure of seeing Miss Carter later in the evening.

After that there was a general exodus, the guests all voluble in expressions of their appreciation of art in general, and Mary's attempt in particular. Several of the girls volunteered to help in the move, that evening. Their offers were gratefully accepted, even though the leading lady in the evening's performance really preferred to attend to the transit unaided.

Not long after dinner an "endless chain" of active workers sped up and down the corridor between room ten and room twenty-four, each more or less heavily burdened. Belle had paraphrased an old rhyme, and was so proud of her effort that she insisted upon reciting it before the work began, as an incentive to effort, she said. Judging by results, later, the incentive seemed lacking in effect as far as the author was concerned.

“Oh! hustle, daughter, hustle,
And you shall have a cow.
I never hustled in my life
So I can't hustle now!

“Oh! hustle, daughter, hustle,
And you'll get a cream-puff.
I never hustled in my life;
Your offer's not enough!

“Oh! hustle, daughter, hustle,
And you shall have some candy.
I never hustled in my life,
But now you'll see I'm handy!”

“Get her a crutch, do!” Mary suggested laughingly, after the recitation was over, and Belle had acknowledged several imaginary encores. “Such lame feet — her poetry, I mean!”

As they set to work on the real task of the evening, one of the girls began lightly humming a nonsense jingle with which they were all familiar. Soon the corridor rang with its jolly tune, as one after another took up the refrain.

Miss Townsend heard the unusual noise and looked out, but when she saw the merry procession, laden with dresses, hats, coats and toilet accessories, she retreated into her room and shut the door, smiling softly. Such gay, girlish spirits! Unconsciously she herself danced a little jig to the rollicking tune. But the gladness vanished as quickly as it came, and she attacked the science

papers she was correcting with an impatient little sigh.

“ Oh! the first of May is moving day,
Is moving day in the morning!
Then the women work while the men all pray,
For peace, sweet peace, in the morning!

“ See! the women up at the break of day,
On moving day in the morning,
While the men all shirk and try to run away,
On moving day in the morning!

“ Then! the mirror cracks and the stove won't draw,
On moving day in the morning!
And the screw-driver's lost and they can't find the saw,
On moving day in the morning! ”

“ There are forty more verses,” Grace explained when they ran out of rhymes. “ It's first cousin to the ‘ Grasshopper Sitting on a Sweet Potato Vine,’ but we'll save the rest for another concert.”

“ Here comes the postlude,” whispered Belle, as Lilian came puffing along the corridor bearing a tiny tray of pins, which had been overlooked. “ Such a burst of energy will be followed by a full rest! ”

Beth solemnly presented each helper with a bright new penny, in payment for her services.

“ I've heard of people being deeply moved,” Belle declared as she received her penny, “ but I think Beth is cheaply moved! Good night! Sleep

tight, and don't forget to make a wish. It's sure to come true on the first night in a new room."

Then quiet settled upon the corridor, although Taps had not yet sounded. The two girls in number twenty-four began to undress at once, tired out after their day of dissipation. They had just scrambled into bed, and were falling asleep, when Beth suddenly started up with a sharp exclamation.

"Where's Tinker? Oh, Mary! I completely forgot him! Where can he be?"

They searched the room and the dressing-closet, but no small dog appeared in answer to their coaxing appeals. Then Beth donned a bathrobe and slipped out into the corridor; and there she found him, crouching disconsolately outside room number ten, as close to its inhospitable door as he could get. For the first time in his memory, his mistress' door was closed, and he was on the wrong side! His feelings were evidently deeply wounded, and several days passed before the little creature really adopted Beth's new room as home, in spite of his gay, new pillow, and much petting.

CHAPTER IX

A COMMITTEE OF ADJUSTMENT

It was not long before the girls realized that the course of true love in "our engagement," as they always called it, was not running smoothly at all. They were all so deeply interested in the romance of their favorite teacher that they took the matter very much to heart.

The flashing diamond had disappeared from Miss Townsend's slender white finger, taking with it the pretty color from the sweet face. At first the Quartette thought that she had decided not to wear the ring while teaching, but they were reluctantly forced to abandon this comforting solution.

For one thing, Millie's attitude spoke volumes, disagreeable volumes; and some of her remarks put the Quartette instinctively upon the defensive.

"Mother does not approve of the match at all," she informed them one day, her manner a queer mingling of defiance and disdain. "Of course the family expected my brother to marry a society girl, not just a —"

“A what?” Belle demanded so fiercely that Millie shrunk away from her. “If your people want more than they’ll find in Miss Townsend, they are hard to suit.”

“But our family is one of the oldest —” she broke off abruptly, as she caught sight of the expression on the faces about her. “Of course, my brother can do as he chooses; he’s perfectly independent; but fortunately she — Miss Townsend — had the good taste to break the engagement herself, as soon as she found out what mother thought about it. I think it’s really good of her, don’t you?”

No one answered, and Millie walked away trying to seem unconcerned, but not succeeding very well.

“So that’s the trouble!” Mary said, as soon as Millie was out of hearing. “I felt pretty sure it was something of that sort.”

“Isn’t it a shame?” asked Belle with angry vehemence. “They are so suited to each other and I know they love each other dearly: any one could see that! And they make such a handsome couple, too. She’d be a regular queen at West Point. Oh, dear!”

“I wish we could do something to help, but —” Grace ended with a sigh.

“There it is!” Belle flashed out impetuously. “We know what the trouble is, and we love her

dearly; but we mustn't interfere. Oh, no! Even though we could straighten matters out very easily. People are so queer."

"All the world is queer but thee and me,
And sometimes thee's a little queer!"

Grace hummed lightly. "But I agree with you, Belle; it is hard to keep from meddling when we care so much."

"Millie is so aggravating," Mary said in aggrieved tones. "She's always hinting that it's a mistake to have an engagement between people who are not of the same station!"

"Captain Moffatt's station is West Point!" Grace put in mildly.

"Hm! a joke!" Belle said, adding critically: "Not bad for a first offense, but pray don't get the habit, child: it's wearing on one's friends."

"Do you know," Mary began earnestly, "I really believe we've reached the root of the misunderstanding. His people have said something about her, and she has heard it; or perhaps they wrote to her directly. At any rate she has broken the engagement without telling him the real reason. Don't you remember Millie said they always expected Captain Moffatt to marry a society girl?"

"As if any one could be sweeter and gentler and truer than Miss Townsend! Why, she's cultured and refined — an American princess. She always

dressess in good taste, too. How tiresome some people are!"

While Belle was speaking, one of the maids came down the corridor towards the group at the end window, bearing a card upon her tiny salver.

"Do you know where Miss Townsend is?" she asked.

"In her room, I think, Anne," Grace replied, casting a meaning glance at the card. "Can we help you?"

"Yes, miss, if you will. But Miss Townsend's not in her room, and the gentleman's in a hurry. Besides, there's some ladies at the door waitin' to speak to Miss Horton."

The girl surrendered the card and hurried away, but Belle, after a glance at it, called after her: "Anne! oh, Anne! show the gentleman into the small reception room. Don't forget, please — the small one."

Belle found Miss Townsend in one of the classrooms, and was greeted cheerily.

"What is it, dear? Anything I can do for you?"

"No, thank you, but there's a caller for you. Anne has shown — the caller into the small reception room, as Miss Horton also has visitors."

"Who is she? Did she send no card?"

"I — I —" Belle hesitated, torn between the necessity for telling the truth, and her anxiety

to send Miss Townsend down-stairs at any cost. Her hesitation, and her very evident desire for flight, aroused the little lady's suspicions, which were verified by Belle's flushed face and eager, excited manner.

"Kindly tell the caller that I am busy, and can see no one," she requested haughtily, her small head raised defiantly, her big eyes flashing.

"But Miss Townsend, he —"

"Please take my message at once," Miss Townsend commanded. She spoke quietly, but so decisively that Belle was forced to acknowledge her defeat.

The girls hurried up to her before she reached the end of the corridor, not to ask the result of the interview, for Belle's face told that, plainly, but to enter into a council of war.

"It's a pity, a real pity!" Mary commented softly. "I've been wondering; do you believe he knows why she has broken the engagement? Perhaps he doesn't even suspect the real reason."

"Well?" The eager question was uttered by several voices.

"Do you think we'd dare tell him?" Mary asked breathlessly.

"Oh!" was the startled exclamation which greeted the astounding suggestion, while Beth added: "How dreadful!"

"It isn't dreadful!" Mary defended her plan

stoutly. "Even at the risk of seeming meddlesome, I'm tempted to try it. Things couldn't be much worse between them, but they might be much better. What do you think about it?"

"Shall she do it?" jeered Belle. "How she defers to us when her mind is already made up, and she's even now thinking how she'll open the attack! Oh, Mary! Thou art crystal clear; I read thee like a book! Big print, too!"

Mary flushed, but offered no denial.

"If you are brave enough to undertake it, go on," timid Beth urged admiringly. "My blessing go with you."

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," Belle quoted tantalizingly. "No allusions to the case in hand, honey. Go on, I was just teasing."

Mary marched down the corridor with an assurance she was far from feeling. By the time she reached the door of the reception room she was almost convinced that her mission was unpardonably meddlesome — but not quite. A bright spot of color glowed in each cheek. She was greatly excited; it was only by a supreme effort of will-power that she was able to control the nervous trembling that almost overwhelmed her. Was she all wrong in her reasoning? Would Captain Moffatt think her bold, unwomanly?

The start the gentleman gave as she entered the

room was not lost upon her. His evident surprise, and equally evident disappointment made her self-appointed task even harder.

"Good afternoon, Captain Moffatt," she said, extending her hand in cordial greeting. If the slender hand was not quite steady, the captain never noticed it. "We — I — Miss Townsend is very sorry, but she is engaged, and can see no one."

"Very well," the captain said shortly, reaching for his hat and gloves, which he had laid upon the tabouret near by. "Splendid weather we are having, Miss Livingston. I — I wish you good-day."

He shook hands fiercely, and strode towards the door before Mary could collect her forces.

"Oh, wait, Captain Moffatt! Please wait! I — I haven't told you yet."

"I beg your pardon?" he paused irresolutely on the threshold.

"Come in and shut the door, please. I want to tell you something."

Wonderingly the captain obeyed. He had heard of school-girls who were forward and presuming, but Fairmount had never seemed to be afflicted with this class. Certainly Miss Livingston and her friends had not before shown any evidences of it.

"I — we — Captain Moffatt, may I speak very

frankly to you? May I? We love her as much as you do."

"What!" The startled exclamation fairly made Mary jump.

"I can't help it," she defended herself. "At the risk of being rude, we decided to tell you about it."

"We?"

"The girls — the Quartette, I mean."

"To tell me about what?" he questioned gravely.

"About her refusing to see you. We know what the trouble is; that is, we are almost sure of it."

The captain stared at her in perplexity for an instant, then asked quietly: "May I know the reason, too?"

"She — Miss Townsend — thinks you think — your family think — that she's not good enough for you."

"Not good enough! How absurd! How foolish! Surely she doesn't believe — she hasn't any reason to believe —"

"But she has!" Mary interrupted unceremoniously. "From what Millie said we judged that your mother wrote to her. She isn't looking a bit well, Captain Moffatt. We girls have all noticed the change. We are so fond of her, we couldn't help seeing it. Besides —" she stopped abruptly, blushing a fiery red.

"Besides?" the captain questioned gently.

"Well, we — we have all been interested, you know. It's our engagement, and —"

The captain's merry "ha ha!" broke forth in spite of himself. Such a hearty, boyish laugh it was, too.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Livingston," he apologized humbly. "I see the colonel was right. He said he thought it would require more courage to go courting in a girls' school than to face a loaded cannon. I confess I agreed with him, but it was here or nowhere!" He ended with a chuckle of amusement.

"You may laugh all you please," Mary went on resentfully, "but you don't know how much we have done for you. Why, that time when you gave her the ring, you wouldn't have had ten minutes to yourselves, no, not five minutes, if it hadn't been for our help. We inveigled Millie into our room and kept her there for twenty-eight minutes. The door-key got lost, somehow or other. And since then we've been on guard more than once." Mary finished in grave earnest, but there was a merry twinkle in the captain's eyes as he listened.

"I am deeply indebted to you," he said, with a gallant bow. "Please convey my sincere thanks to your co-workers. If I thought —" he hesitated, frowning in perplexity, his lips com-

pressed into a firm white line. "Well, we'll soon settle that! Good-by, Miss Livingston. I need not ask that you will keep this affair a secret, you and the rest of the Quartette, of course."

"And I need not ask that you will respect our confidence," Mary retorted promptly. "We —" but she ended her speech with an involuntary "Oh!" as the captain wrung her hand, and marched out.

She flew back to the impatient watchers, and gave them a full account of the interview. Her recital was greeted with exclamations of satisfaction.

"I wonder what he intends to do?" Belle asked. "If she won't see him he can't send up a detachment of soldiers, and drag her down."

"He'll manage it in some way," Mary assured her confidently. "If you had seen him when he said: 'Well, we'll soon settle that!' you wouldn't worry about it. That mouth and chin of his were as firm as — as the Rock of Gibraltar. Do you know, I've always thought it would be nice to have a handsome man squeeze my hand," she confessed, making a comical face as she did so; "but I've changed my mind. The next time any lover in distress wants to express his exuberance, I'll ask him to write it, or sing it, anything rather than that deadly grip."

There was nothing more to be done, so the

eager girls were forced to await developments with as much patience as they could muster. Fortunately they were not tried very long. Only two days after "The Interview" — they always spoke of it in capital letters — a handsome limousine, with an imposing coat-of-arms upon its panels, swept up the driveway, and stopped beneath Fairmount's porte-cochère. From its capacious depths an elegantly gowned matron emerged and asked to see Miss Townsend.

The maid accepted the proffered card, but returned soon afterward with the announcement that Miss Townsend was indisposed, and begged to be excused.

"Wait a moment," the caller commanded, visibly ruffled by the refusal. She scribbled a little message upon the card, and once more gave it to the maid. "Give her this, with my love. I will wait."

And she did, settling herself back comfortably in her large arm-chair. But in spite of the studied indifference, she started nervously at every sound, and twice rose to her feet as some one passed the door. At last, after what must have seemed an interminable interval, Miss Townsend came quietly into the room. She was daintily gowned, as usual, and her face, which had been colorless of late, wore a becoming flush which made her seem very girlish indeed.

The matron surveyed her, for an instant, in sheer surprise; they had never met before, even though Millie had been in Fairmount for several years. Then, without a word, she ignored the outstretched hand, and smilingly gathered the slender little figure into her arms.

"Oh! it looked lovely! just lovely!" Beth told the others excitedly. "I happened to be passing the door at that moment so —"

"I've heard of eavesdropping with one's eyes, and if it were any one but Beth Carter, our angel-member," Belle interrupted laughingly, "I should question that 'happened to be passing'! But —"

"You know very well that I didn't spy upon them deliberately." Beth turned to Belle with eyes flashing angrily. "I was coming home from the village when I caught sight of the Moffatts' motor. I have met Mrs. Moffatt, so I —"

"Your apology is accepted, Miss Carter."

"But it is not an apology," Beth persisted with a stamp of her foot. For once Belle's teasing really rankled.

"There! there! honey! Of co'se we understand. I love to get you excited, Beth. You are usually so serenely calm and unruffled, it's a real pleasure. Thank you!"

Beth looked unutterable things, but the questions which the rest showered upon her turned her thoughts into another channel. Then the Quartette

speculated upon the interview, its cause and effect, until they had settled the matter satisfactorily to themselves, at least.

"He certainly brought his mamma around quite promptly," Mary said, in great elation over this pleasing sequel to her efforts as peace-maker. "I only hope Miss Townsend will make her see that she's being honored by the alliance."

"'She' meaning Mrs. Moffatt, I presume," Belle amended. "Your diction is far from clear. Miss Livingston: you ought to —"

"There goes Millie to join in the Love Feast," Grace interrupted jubilantly. "I didn't say one word before, but the Moffatts are all wrong about Miss Townsend. She belongs to an old Knickerbocker family, a very wealthy family, too — one of the Washington Square contingent. After she graduated from college she insisted on putting her education to practical use, in spite of all her parents could do. And just think, while the Moffatts were acting this way, as though they were superior, she never said a word. And they are newcomers, as far as New York is concerned. Anyway, it doesn't make the slightest difference. Miss Townsend is a genuine gentlewoman, irrespective of family, or anything else."

"Reminds me of a game my brothers and I used to play," Belle began, laughing. "I'm a genteel lady, always genteel, and I have a menag-

erie; and in that menagerie is — the Moffatt family, in this case! I only hope she will keep them properly subdued, all except the captain, of course.”

“Hurrah for the captain!” Grace said, with a satisfied smile, “he’s all right!”

“And so are his sisters, and his cousins, and his aunts — now!” Mary added significantly; “thanks to us!”

“Yes, thanks to us!”

Four exultant young ladies danced and pranced about the corridor like girls of five, blissfully ignorant of the fact that meddling in other people’s affairs, especially love affairs, is disastrous ninety-nine times out of a hundred.

But then, this was the hundredth time!

CHAPTER X

A RAIN OF REGRETS

"WHEN did I wear this dress last?" Belle asked suddenly, one afternoon as she was dressing for dinner.

"Is it a riddle?" Grace answered indifferently, without even raising her eyes from her work. She had dressed early, and was busily mounting some of Belle's snap-shots upon dark gray cardboard. "Which dress are you talking about? You have enough for three or four girls. You see, my child, the evils of an overstocked wardrobe."

"Oh! do stop, Grace! I'm in earnest. I mean this pale blue batiste." She picked up the hem as she spoke, without lifting the dress from its hook. "I intended to wear it to-night, but it's so soiled I can't. It looks as though it had been to a coal-dust dance, or a soot soirée."

"You'd better decide in a hurry, or you'll be late," Grace warned her friend.

Belle crushed the blue dress back in the closet, slammed the door, and hurried into the other gown so rapidly that Grace was just fastening the last hooks when the gong sounded.

"On the home-stretch, Grace?" Belle asked anxiously, for Miss Horton disliked to have the girls straggle in, at breakfast, lunch or dinner.

"Yep!" was the laconic reply. "O. K.! Come on!"

The two sped down the corridor, arm-in-arm, took the stairs at a breakneck pace, and triumphantly reached their places at the table just in time for the opening words of the blessing which Miss Horton asked before each meal. Then, flushed and breathless, they slipped into their chairs. Belle was accustomed to these "close shaves," as she called them, on account of her easy-going habits, and Grace was equally accustomed to them on account of her friend's dilatoriness.

The next morning the mail-bag was crowded to its full capacity, and Chesty growled audibly as he sorted the great pile of letters and cards.

Chesty, short for "Lord Chesterfield," was known to his friends as John O'Keefe. For years he had attended to duties many and various — "when he couldn't get out of them," Belle declared. He was a crusty old fellow, whom the girls "pestered" unmercifully by their unending demands. Once, when asked whom he considered the happiest man who had ever lived, he answered unhesitatingly: "Rob'son Crusoe, 'cause no gals c'd git to that thar island of his'n!"

On the morning in question he seemed to be in a particularly "inharmonious" mood, and grumbled unceasingly.

"Some people just seem to spend thar lives a writin'!" he muttered angrily. "An' as fer them thar fool pictur-cards —" Indignation evidently corked up the vials of his wrath, or else he could find no language fit to express his opinion, so he went on with his sorting to an obligato of subdued disapproval.

"Chesty! Oh, Chesty!" Belle called sweetly. "Did you know that they are not going to make postals any longer?"

"No! Ye don't say! Well, I'm certainly glad of that now. I counted eggshactly three hunnerd an' two of 'em, the first week the 'Cademy opened — three hunnerd an' two! Why ain't they goin' to make 'em any longer?"

"Because," Belle began slowly, as she edged toward the stairway, to put a safe distance between herself and her victim, "because they are long enough already!"

"Humph!" was the disgusted reply. "I just thought it ud be somethin' like that. Humph!" And the old fellow vented his wrath upon the innocent missives he was arranging and pigeon-holing.

There was a rush for the mail the instant he completed his task. Each one of the older girls re-

ceived a pale gray letter with a pale green seal — Stanleigh's paper and Stanleigh's seal.

"They are the acceptances for the Love Feast," Mary announced with calm certainty, as she examined the one addressed to herself. "I'm the human X-Ray: watch me read mine without opening it. 'Miss Violet Gerry accepts Miss Mary Livingston's invitation for the Hallowe'en party, with great pleasure.' " She ended by tossing the letter aside, and beginning eagerly upon one from her father, who was in Mexico. A surprised exclamation from Grace interrupted her.

"Isn't this too bad! The girl I invited can't come. She doesn't give any reason, either. The letter seems almost discourteous. Queer, isn't it?"

"That will make an uneven number," Mary said, looking up from her letter. "Whom can we invite in her place?"

"No, it won't," contradicted Belle, "because my girl can't come either. She has sent a most ungracious reply: 'Miss Ethel Van Stamp regrets that she cannot accept Miss Gray's invitation for Hallowe'en.' Look here, Mary, you'd better read your letter; that X-Ray of yours might not be in good working order."

Then there was a hurried breaking of green seals and opening of gray envelopes, the home mail being, for the time, forgotten. A chorus of "Re-

gret!" " Mine's a regret!" " Here's another!" followed.

The girls stared at each other, too aghast even to hazard an explanation of such an unusual phenomenon. This bi-yearly Love Feast in which both schools joined was an institution of long standing, and the dates for its celebration seldom varied, Stanleigh entertaining in the spring, Fairmount on or near Hallowe'en. But even so, the dates were never decided without due consultation with the other school.

" Perhaps they have heard about our attraction, and are jealous of our good luck," Belle suggested in explanation.

" They would be all the more anxious to accept if they knew that he was to be here," Mary replied. " I don't understand it. Let's ask Miss Horton. Wait a moment, girls; don't all go; just the committee will be enough. We'll tell you what she says."

The Quartette, all of whom were on the committee that year, sought the study in genuine anxiety. As they entered in answer to a low-toned " Come!" Miss Horton looked up, and greeted them with a quiet smile of welcome. They simply handed her the regrets, by way of explanation. She was as surprised as they, but could offer no solution of the mystery.

" Have you had any misunderstanding with them?" she asked searchingly.

"No, indeed," Mary assured her earnestly: "not even a hint of a tint of one."

"They've been so angelic ever since they stole Tinker," Belle added, "that I've been afraid they'd die young. By the way, Mary, do you remember the group of Stanleigh girls we passed yesterday? They acted so queer — we spoke of it at the time — but I had forgotten about it. Why, they scarcely acknowledged our greeting at all, did they? It didn't make much impression on my mind, though; it takes more than Stanleigh Hall to trouble me."

Miss Horton thought over the matter for a moment, then turned towards the telephone on her desk.

"I will ask Mrs. Vanderhoff about it," she decided. "I know that the Love Feast is a school-girl affair, but there must be something pre-arranged about such a rain of regrets as this. If there is any misunderstanding it is best to set matters right at once. You may wait until I call up the school."

The girls looked at one another in uneasy suspense while the usual interchange of telephone courtesies was taking place. Then they heard Miss Horton say: "I am very sorry, Mrs. Vanderhoff, that your seniors are unable to accept our invitation for Hallowe'en. We have an especial treat in store which we are anxious to share with them."

"I'm not!" whispered Belle fiercely — the girls were far enough away not to disturb Miss Horton. "If there's anything I despise it's people who have a grievance and won't tell it!"

"No danger for you on that score, Miss Pepper," retorted Mary, in equally subdued tones.

"What's that?"

Miss Horton's sharp tone was so unlike her usual low, even accents that it fairly startled the girls.

"Oh! impossible!" was the next exclamation that reached them.

"Isn't telephone conversation perfectly maddening to the listener?" whispered Grace. "I think a good punishment for curious people would be to station them in a busy telephone booth, and make them listen."

"And you were willing to credit such a rumor?" Miss Horton asked, in shocked surprise.

Then there was another maddening pause, during which the girls forgot even to whisper. They studied Miss Horton's face as she listened, noting with dismay the tightening of the lips, and the angry flash of the eyes, which the communication produced.

"Did your informant designate the guilty ones?" she asked next, in sarcastic tones utterly new to the listeners. "If so, it is only due to me, to enlighten me." The short pause was followed by the words: "Impossible! Do you know those girls, Mrs.

Vanderhoff? If you do, you would realize, as I do, the utter absurdity of the charge."

Finally, after what seemed like an endless wait to the anxious girls, Miss Horton closed the conversation with the words: "Very well! I shall sift this matter thoroughly, but understand, please, that I have the utmost confidence in my pupils. Good-by."

Then the good lady snapped the receiver into place with hurt emphasis, and turned a flushed face to the waiting Quartette.

"The Stanleigh girls are acting upon the suggestion, or with the approval, rather, of their principal, in this matter of the regrets," she informed them quietly.

"How strange!" Grace commented in surprise. "Mrs. Vanderhoff always seemed to enjoy the Love Feasts as much as the girls themselves. I don't understand it."

"Won't you tell us the reason for the refusals?" Mary asked; but Miss Horton was lost in troubled thought.

"Please tell us," Belle urged coaxingly. Miss Horton hesitated uncertainly, and Belle added: "We couldn't help overhearing some of it, for you told us to wait; and I really think we ought to know what it's all about."

"Yes, I agree with you, Belle," Miss Horton answered finally. "I have decided to take you

into my confidence because I think you ought to know, and because I need your help. My keenest regret is that Mrs. Vanderhoff should have acted so ungraciously, after all our years of friendship. I feel sure that, were the cases reversed, I should have gone to her frankly, and helped her clear up the matter as quickly and quietly as possible, instead of allowing the girls to take the stand they have taken. It is lacking in consideration for me, and I feel it deeply."

"But what is wrong?" Belle questioned impatiently. "We haven't anything contagious in the Seventh Heaven, have we? I saw the Angel only this morning. It seems like much ado about nothing, to me."

By "Seventh Heaven," Belle meant the cool, airy, well-equipped infirmary on the top floor of one of the wings, over which Miss Hampton, the trained nurse, otherwise the "Angel," presided.

"No, Belle, it is really a very serious matter, but we will soon clear up the mystery, I hope."

"A mystery? Goody!" Belle interrupted impulsively. "We'll all help, Miss Horton. Behold the 'Sherlock Holmes Association,' organized right this minute. I'd like to see the mystery we couldn't solve if we set our minds to it."

Miss Horton smiled involuntarily. She never took offense at Belle's nonsense, because she realized that beneath the impulsive words and deeds

lay true womanliness which each year was bringing more and more into evidence.

"Please go on and tell us what it's all about," Belle urged.

"Possibly she might," Mary could not resist saying, in mild sarcasm, "if she were given the opportunity."

"Mrs. Vanderhoff informs me," Miss Horton began gravely, "that her scholars do not care to associate with girls who attend public masquerade balls, in a common dancing hall!"

Dead silence followed her speech. Four startled girls gazed at the speaker uncomprehendingly, while Miss Horton searched each face before her with anxious scrutiny. Evidently she was satisfied with what she found there, for she sighed in a relieved way, and settled back comfortably in her chair. The unwonted flush upon her face gradually disappeared, and she even smiled at their consternation.

"A public masquerade ball?" Beth repeated in wondering tones. "Surely she couldn't believe that any of your girls would do such a thing as that!"

Miss Horton appreciated the unconscious compliment. It was balm to her wounded feelings.

"What made her think it was some of the Fairmount girls?" Mary demanded angrily.

"They were recognized by Miss Sharp's maid, I understand."

"Oh! Miss Sharp! so it's that —" Miss Horton looked at her in quiet reproof and Belle checked herself, adding cleverly, "that fittingly named lady who is responsible for the trouble! Well, we'll be the 'Misses Sharp,' we girls, and we'll see which is sharper."

"It is simply a case of mistaken identity," Miss Horton said, "but we may find it difficult to prove, nevertheless. I intended to tell Mrs. Vanderhoff that my rule requires every girl to report to the teacher in charge of her corridor, at Taps, each night, but she forestalled me by saying that the girls in question appeared at the ball quite late, and refused to unmask. It seems that Miss Sharp thinks that sort of an escapade is quite common among boarding-school girls!"

Miss Horton's expression spoke volumes. It was only by a supreme effort that the girls restrained themselves from rending the uncharitable Miss Sharp to pieces, verbally at least; but they did refrain, out of consideration for their principal's feelings.

"Did we go in a body, or just two or three of us?" Mary asked cuttingly. "It is well to be informed of one's own movements, don't you think so?"

"It was two girls only," Miss Horton answered.

“ May we know which two? ”

Miss Horton thought for a moment before replying.

“ No, dear,” she said finally. “ The honor of the school is at stake, so it concerns us all.”

“ Miss Horton!” Grace’s voice trembled as she spoke. “ Do you — you surely don’t believe — ”

“ I have absolute trust in you all,” was the hearty response. “ Still, we must sift this matter thoroughly. Mrs. Vanderhoff believes that she has good grounds for her attitude, and, as I said before, while I myself should have set about it very differently, we must make all allowances. And we must not lose sight for a moment of the fact that the charge is a very grave one, in a school like this. To me, it is especially distressing. I am strict in my ideas of chaperonage for girls, but in some ways many people think me too lax, because I believe in trusting my pupils, in putting them upon honor. The foolish ‘ adventures ’ that are permitted, or at least condoned, in some schools, have spoiled many a life. We must do all we can to disprove this charge. You may go now.”

The girls left the room in subdued excitement, while Miss Horton lay back in her chair and thought the matter over.

“ How thankful I am that I can feel as absolutely sure as I do,” she mused. “ For one mo-

ment, just for one moment, my heart misgave me, when I remembered Belle's love of acting; but one look at her face reassured me." A smile chased away the grim expression on her own face, as she added, with a satisfied sigh: "I think I have placed the matter in competent hands."

Meanwhile the girls talked the affair over from every point of view, without arriving at any solution. They kept their eyes and ears open for any clue, but days went by and nothing was discovered that could throw the least light upon the matter.

"But we won't give up!" Belle declared vehemently. "We'll never give up! Do you know, when Miss Horton turned away from the 'phone, that day after Mrs. Vanderhoff had told her about it, she looked at me very strangely. I've thought of it often, since then. I'm almost sure I'm one of the guilty ones."

"Then I must have been the other one," Grace added, as a matter of course. "Queer we can't recall it, isn't it? Balls," with disdainful emphasis, "especially masquerade balls, are not of such frequent occurrence here at Fairmount, that we should forget this one."

The girls finally decided to go to the fountain-head — to visit Miss Sharp herself, so eager were they to wipe away the stain upon Fairmount's fair record. This lady was the winter tenant of

the Nook, the estate whose grounds were separated from the Academy grounds only by a fence. But she had not rented the Bath Tub, as the girls called the beautiful little pond near Fairmount's boundaries. Mr. Langdon, the owner, had stipulated in the lease that both pond and boat-house were to be at the disposal of the Academy girls, in spite of Miss Sharp's vigorous arguments to the contrary. Not that the lady wanted either pond or boat-house; it was simply a case of "dog in the manger."

"He's a saint!" Beth gravely informed Miss Horton, in speaking of Mr. Langdon's kindness. "We girls have canonized him, and he surely deserves it, for no one but a real saint would have been so thoughtful. Just think what it means to us! All our skating!"

Miss Horton smiled a queer little smile, after Beth had left her. She had refrained from telling her that the gentleman in question, this same "Saint Langdon," was considered "as hard as nails." His kindly attitude towards the Fairmount girls, in arranging for their continued use of the Bath Tub and Den, was evidently the untouched heel of this calloused Achilles. Perhaps the genuine respect and thankfulness that the girls felt towards him rewarded him for his unbusiness-like stipulation.

Miss Sharp, the new tenant at the Nook, was

as unlike its former tenant, the dear "Lady," now Beth's mother, as possible. She was suspicious and fault-finding, and seemed to think that girlish fun and frolic were bound to be wrong, no matter how innocent they appeared.

"If she ever was young it's been so long ago that she's forgotten it," they decided among themselves.

"I cannot help thinking," Grace said, "that she ought to have come to Miss Horton with that report her maid gave her. Why should she have gone all the way across the river to tell Mrs. Vanderhoff about it? It's strange how some people evade doing the good deeds right in their way, but go a long way out of their way to do mean things."

"Grace! Oh, Grace! Haven't you lost your way in that sentence?" Belle questioned mischievously. "Among so many ways you might easily lose the right way. Please analyze that last sentence, if you can!"

The visit to Miss Sharp was a failure, as far as throwing any light upon the mystery was concerned. In the first attempt they were flatly refused admittance. The second was more fortunate in so far that they came upon the lady walking in the grounds, and opened the subject before she could escape.

"You surely realize, Miss Sharp," Mary ended

earnestly, "that we could not be guilty of such a thing."

"I know what girls are when they are on a 'lark,'" Miss Sharp answered acidly. "I know something about boarding-schools, young lady."

"But not about this school, Miss Sharp," Belle answered promptly. "Why, Fairmount girls couldn't possibly do such a thing. It — it wouldn't appeal to them at all."

This earnest explanation was rewarded only by a contemptuous sniff, which made Belle shut her lips tight, to keep back the angry retort.

"May we speak to your maid, please?" Mary asked gently. "She might help us to straighten out the misunderstanding."

"Certainly not!" was the emphatic reply.

"But we only wish to ask her a few questions," Mary persisted anxiously. "She must have been mistaken —"

"She was not mistaken!" Miss Sharp's crisp, hateful tones interrupted. "I have the utmost faith in Céleste — the utmost faith!"

"I wish we had," Belle muttered, as the Quartette turned away in deep disappointment.

"I hope this will be a lesson to you, in the future," the lady called after them. "I regret that I cannot set aside the word of a tried servant for that of a set of harum-scarum boarding-school girls."

“ Her tone sounds regretful, doesn’t it? ” Beth murmured sarcastically, while Grace called back to the lady, confidently: “ We’ll make you believe us some time, Miss Sharp. We’ll straighten out this tangle sooner or later. Just wait and see.”

“ I’ll wait,” was the significant retort, in a tone which betrayed its owner’s disbelief in any results, either then or later.

CHAPTER XI

GUESTS AND GUESTS

THE date set for the Love Feast approached, and the girls had discovered nothing which would throw any light on the subject of Miss Sharp's charge against them. They began to realize that amateur detective work, even when the detectives are inspired with earnest zeal, is not easy. Never once did they despair of solving the riddle eventually, but the period of waiting was hard to bear.

Then, too, they were undecided just what course to pursue, regarding the reading. It was too great a treat to be kept selfishly to themselves. At Miss Horton's suggestion they had already invited many of the neighbors, but what would a Love Feast be without young people? Yet in this case the chosen young people had refused to avail themselves of the privilege.

When Mary, as chairman of the committee, extended the invitation to Colonel Arnold, that gentleman said, in surprise: "But I thought the Love Feast was sacred to Stanleigh and Fairmount. I accept, Miss Mary, pray have no doubts whatever,

on that score, only, like the proverbial Yankee, 'I want to know!'"

For a moment Mary hesitated, uncertain as to the wisest course, for it had been decided to keep the disagreeable affair to themselves, as much as possible; but one glance at the kindly face before her settled her doubts, and she confided the whole story to him. For the only time in her remembrance, Mary saw the gentle old Colonel really angry.

"I fail to understand," he said severely, "how any one who knows our girls could believe such a report for an instant. That old maid at the Nook doesn't count; I beg your pardon, my dear! but I gave Mrs. Vanderhoff credit for deeper penetration than she has displayed in this case. A masked ball! Nonsense!"

This partisanship was balm to the wounded feelings of the girls, but, comforting as it was, it faded into insignificance in comparison to that other balm which came to them on the day before the treat. The Seniors were preparing for their physical culture lesson, when Chesty suddenly appeared at the door of the gymnasium, and delivered his message in his usual courtly manner.

"Miss Livin'ston wanted at the tel'phone!" was the gruff announcement.

"Who wants me, Chesty?" Mary inquired impatiently. "I'm busy now; I don't like to break

into my lesson. Why didn't you ask what the message was? "

"It's one of them thar Stanleigh people," he answered shortly: it was bad enough to have to go all the way down to the gym, he thought, without being expected to carry the message along, too. "Annyhow, she wouldn't give it to me."

"Stanleigh!" Mary repeated, in startled tones. "Do you suppose — wait a minute, and I'll find out. Please excuse me, Miss Elston. I'll be back just as soon as I can."

Mary flew up to the office without even changing her gymnasium suit, so anxious was she to hear what Stanleigh had to say. Perhaps they had discovered their mistake, and the ugly mystery would be cleared away forever. Such a fuss over such a foolish thing! Of course, if it were true, it would not be foolish, but —

"Hello! yes! I am Miss Livingston," she began breathlessly. "Oh! it's you, Miss Gerry? Good morning."

"What's that?" she exclaimed sharply, a moment later. "Oh!" her tone was a queer mingling of disappointment and elation. "I — I hardly know what to say. We — we have made other arrangements, you know, and — Hold the wire a moment, please, until I speak to Miss Horton."

She laid the receiver on the desk, and hurried away to find Miss Horton. Fortunately that lady

happened to be in her study, instead of in a classroom.

"They want to come, Miss Horton," she began, without preamble of any kind.

"They do?" Miss Horton asked, smiling at Mary's vehemence, but understanding the enigmatical "they" instantly.

"Yes! They just called me up about it. They say they feel sure that there has been some mistake, and they are sorry they acted so hastily. There was a lot more about 'breaking off a custom of long standing' and 'the friendship of years!' Humph! Why didn't they think of long-standing customs and years of friendship before they sent those mean little notes?"

"Did Mrs. Vanderhoff herself telephone?" Miss Horton asked quietly.

"No, Miss Horton! It was Violet Gerry, but she said that Mrs. Vanderhoff sent her regards to you, and deeply regrets the misunderstanding. Miss Gerry asked for me because she knows I have charge of this year's Love Feast, I suppose."

"Well?" questioned Miss Horton gravely.

"There isn't any question about it," Mary began firmly. "We don't want —" Her tone began to lose some of its firmness, and she stammered uncertainly. "We don't — I — oh! I don't know what to say!" she ended helplessly.

"What do you want to say?" Miss Horton

asked with significant emphasis, fixing a keen glance upon the flushed, perturbed, young face.

"I want to say 'no!'" Mary flashed back sharply. "It will be very crowded, very, now that we have invited the neighbors, and I'd like to tell her so, but —"

"But —" Miss Horton repeated, still in that quiet non-committal way. She knew that Mary was having a hard fight, but she purposely let her come to a decision unbiased by any word from her.

"Won't you decide for us, Miss Horton? Honestly, it's hard to know what to do in a case like this."

"No, Mary," Miss Horton contradicted softly, "it isn't hard to know what to do; your very hesitation betrays that; but it is hard to do it, under the circumstances."

"You think I ought to say yes?" Mary asked slowly, anxiously. "Oh! I know you do, so what's the use of asking! But it will be dreadfully crowded; and besides, they don't deserve it, so there!"

Miss Horton laughed heartily.

"Too bad we cannot make a sacrifice and get just what we want in return, isn't it? But that only happens in books, I'm afraid."

"I can see that you want them to come," Mary

said finally, "so I'll tell them it's all right; but I don't want them one bit, myself, and I know the others don't either," she ended bluntly.

"Then you cannot invite them," was the decisive reply. "A hostess, whether a school or an individual, must be sincere in her hospitality."

Mary pondered over this view of the situation so earnestly that a deep frown wrinkled her forehead. Miss Horton was fully alive to the mental struggle she was going through, but she waited without a word, for the result. She seldom "preached" to her girls, but by precept and example she tried to make them true gentlewomen, in thought, word and deed.

"I — I'll try to want them," Mary declared suddenly. Then she hurried from the room as though she feared her resolution would fail if she delayed. Miss Horton smiled and nodded to herself approvingly.

Mary returned to the telephone, and gave as gracious an invitation as was possible, then hurried back to the gym, and told the girls about it.

"Miss Horton wants us to want them," she ended soberly.

There was dead silence for a moment. Several of the girls looked decidedly rebellious.

"It will be dreadfully crowded, that's one thing sure," Belle commented, adding in a lower tone,

as she turned to finish her exercise on the parallel bars: "and I hope they'll be uncomfortable!"

Mary overheard the remark, subdued as it was.

"If the rest of you feel as Belle does we will have to recall the invitation," she said quietly. "We must entertain them in the right spirit or not at all."

This unconscious quoting of Miss Horton's words made a decided impression upon her audience. Even Belle stopped her gyrations and perched herself upon one of the bars, lost in thought, the result of which she finally announced.

"We'll heap coals of fire on their heads — good hot ones! We'll welcome them; we'll give them as good a time as we possibly can: then I, for one, shall feel free to 'speed the parting guest.'" The others agreed, and the matter was settled.

Just as the gym work was over, and the class was gathered in a group near the lockers, Miss Horton herself surprised them by her appearance.

"I've come to beg still another invitation," she began smilingly.

"Miss Sharp and her beloved Céleste!" Belle ejaculated, before she could restrain herself. "We will certainly earn our halos, if that's the case!"

"No! not Miss Sharp! some friends of Colonel Arnold, this time."

"Any friends of the Colonel will be welcome,

Miss Horton," Grace declared promptly. "You told him so, didn't you?"

"No. Mary said it would be quite crowded if Stanleigh came, so I —"

"Some people crowd more than others," Belle explained laughingly. "The Colonel's friends are the uncrowding kind."

"Belle's collecting material for a new appendix to the dictionary," Grace remarked teasingly, "but if 'un-crowding's' a sample, it will have to undergo an operation for appendicitis immediately."

Belle favored the speaker with a disdainful glance, as Miss Horton, smiling at the girlish jibe, went on speaking.

"If you are sure you can make room for these people," she paused in assumed uncertainty, "I'll tell the Colonel it is all right. He wants to know at once, so that he can order the fa—that is —"

"So that he can order the fa—" Mary filled in the tantalizing pause. "I know the ending to that anagram; it's v-o-r-s! And it's the Eustis Seniors he wants to ask!"

"That spells 'dance,' doesn't it, Miss Horton?" Belle urged coaxingly.

But Miss Horton laughingly refused to commit herself. She hurried away, stopping for a moment at the door, to remind them: "You will have to

plan the seating for so many. Remember, the reading comes before the dance and the favors, if that is what the Colonel means."

"There won't be seats enough unless we all stand up," Belle began eagerly. "Even an extra row all around the room won't make it. That dining-room wasn't planned for a theatre, so we can't put in any more rows, or no one will be able to see the reader at all: and if we stand out in the hall we won't see much, and we'll hear less."

"I tell you what we can do," Mary suggested. "They know it's a special case, so no one will mind. We'll bring in all the omnibus and carriage cushions we can find, and Stanleigh and Eustis can bring theirs in, too; then the three schools can sit on the floor, and the grown-ups can have the chairs."

Dinner was served a whole hour earlier, on the eventful night, so that the dining-room could be cleared and arranged for the reading and dance later. The decorations were unique, and in keeping with the day. Jack-o-lanterns were hung on the walls; witches, riding on broomsticks, were suspended from the chandeliers; and pumpkin-colored shades covered all the electric lights. On either side of the great alcove which formed the stage, stood an elaborately arrayed broom, with pumpkin head and ghostly white draperies. The whole effect was deliciously shivery and weird,

and the small girls who peeped in before betaking themselves, most unwillingly, to less exciting quarters, gave little squeals of dismay and delight.

The Quartette had spent some time upon the dance-cards, even though the notice had been so short. Each one was decorated in some fitting way, with tiny elves and goblins, imps and fairies, dancing about on them.

"What do you think we are going to have for supper?" Belle whispered to Mary, just before they went up-stairs to dress. They had all been working so hard on the usual final touches that no one had dressed for dinner.

"Elegantly gowned in shirt-waist suits," Grace had described it, after a glance around the table; "more or less presentable!"

"I don't know," Mary answered indifferently. As chairman of the Love Feast she had been too busy to think of the refreshments: they lay outside her province. "Sandwiches and chocolate, ice-cream and cake, I suppose."

"No, ma'am!" Belle smacked her lips in pleased anticipation. "That's an ordinary menu, but this — umm!"

"I wish you'd stop smacking your lips in that silly way, and tell me, if you're going to!"

Mary spoke crossly. The brunt of the decoration and planning had fallen upon her shoulders, and so many vexed questions had arisen before

things were arranged satisfactorily, that she was really tired and out of sorts. Then, too, at the eleventh hour, the committee had decided to "add wings to their halos" by inviting Miss Sharp herself. She was the only neighbor not included, and the omission was decidedly pronounced, even under the circumstances. Miss Horton had not actually suggested sending the invitation, yet the girls felt that she would be pleased if it were done. But in spite of everything, Mary still deeply resented the lady's attitude, although not for worlds would she have betrayed her resentment to the girls. It showed in her irritated manner, however.

Belle stared at her friend in surprise, then she patted the smooth hair soothingly.

"You're tired, honey! We girls have been careless; we've left too much to you, you poor thing! If any one asked me to define 'executive ability' I'd say: 'It's a good thing not to have, unless you like to do all the work.' You go straight up to your room, girly, and don't come down until they all get here. 'Ef you-all don' min' me right off, missy, Ah'll hev to use mah slippah, so Ah will!'"

Belle imitated her old Mammy to perfection, even raising one foot as though preparing to unlace her tie and carry out her threat. Mary had to laugh in spite of herself, as she flew before Belle's vigorous "shoo-ing;" but she paused on the

landing, and asked anxiously: "What are you going to wear, Belle?"

"My embroidered batiste, I reckon," was the careless reply. "I've been so busy I haven't thought about it."

"You must have been busy!" Mary retorted, as she rushed up the stairs. But, quick as she was, Belle's words reached her before she slammed the door of number twenty-four.

"Oh, Mary! don't hurry! I'll entertain Lorimer until you come down. No trouble, I assure you!" Then Belle marched on to number seventeen, satisfied with her parting shot, for Lorimer Van Pelt's liking for Mary was too evident to escape school-girl eyes.

CHAPTER XII

Q. E. D.

"WHAT are you going to wear to-night, Belle?" Grace asked, as the former threw open the door of number seventeen and waltzed lightly in, holding an imaginary partner in the most exaggerated manner. Grace had been up-stairs for some time, and was all ready except her dress.

"Just what I was going to ask you," Belle said, seating her partner, and pretending to fan her attentively. "You know they say that great minds run in the same channel. Mother always thinks a hostess should be well dressed, but not too well, so I suppose my very 'bestest' chiffon will have to blush unseen, as far as to-night's festivity is concerned, at least."

"That settles my white silk poplin, then," Grace decided promptly.

"I think my embroidered batiste will do for to-night," Belle said, as she finished arranging her splendid dark hair. "It seemed rather soiled when I looked at it the other day, but perhaps it won't show so much at night."

"You haven't worn it very often," Grace re-

plied, "so I don't see why it should be soiled. If you wear that, I'll wear my corn-colored crêpe. I'll get them out."

Grace went to the closet, and lifted the two gowns from the hook farthest back in the corner. As she carried them into the brightly lighted room, Belle took hers with an impatient exclamation.

"This is dreadful! I'll simply have to wear something else. Just see this hem! and here's a great tear in the skirt, too. I don't remember when I could have done that."

"I can't wear this," Grace was saying, as she gazed ruefully at the corn-color. "It's positively draggled-looking, as though it had been through a heavy shower. I — what's the matter?" she ended anxiously, as Belle uttered a startled exclamation.

"Grace! see what I've found!" Belle scarcely spoke above a whisper, but her tone was vibrant with excitement.

Grace hurried over, and Belle held the sleeve of her gown toward her. From the lace at the elbow dangled an oblong piece of card-board, suspended by a tasseled cord. It had caught on one of the tiny buckles which ornamented the straps of the sleeve.

"What is it?" she asked, in surprise. "Why, Belle, you —"

"It's a program!" Belle interrupted, sharply;

“ a dance program! See here! No wonder my poor dress looks dragged! ”

“ But I don’t understand,” Grace said slowly, her mind failing to grasp the meaning of the innocent bit of card-board as quickly as Belle’s had done.

“ It’s as plain as day, honey. Here, let me see your dress. Quick! ”

She examined the garment with subdued eagerness, noting a large, untidy, coffee-colored spot upon the front of the skirt, and a number of mud-splashes on and near the hem. Grace watched her breathlessly.

“ We’ve been to that ball, Grace,” she concluded her examination solemnly. “ Here’s proof conclusive.”

“ You don’t mean — ”

“ But I do! These dresses, my blue batiste and your corn-color, were at that ball! No wonder Miss Sharp’s maid recognized them; we wore them the night Miss Horton received, soon after school opened. I distinctly remember speaking to the dear Céleste — that’s her name, isn’t it? — on that night. She drove over with Miss Sharp, and waited for her in the dressing-room.”

“ But I don’t see — ” Grace began helplessly.

“ Oh! you are dense, honey; it’s as plain as can be. See this program — ‘ The Ninth Annual Ball of the Butcher’s Association — McKeenan’s Danc-

ing Pavilion!’ No wonder the dresses are be-draggled! Almost every space on this card is filled, and the back is scribbled with names for the extras. This is a popular dress, no matter what its owner may be!”

“ But what can we do? ” Grace asked.

“ With this as a starter,” Belle pointed to the telltale program, “ and these dresses for proof, it won’t take long to do something, something decisive too! Grace, I know, I’m sure, it’s Mary! ”

“ Mary? ” Grace stared at Belle wildly. “ Mary Livingston? Why, Belle, impossible! ”

“ Not our Mary, Grace, certainly not! I mean Mary MacFarlane. She was so tired, one morning, not long ago. I asked what was the matter, and she said she had caught cold, the night before. I remember now; it had rained pretty hard that night,” Belle went on excitedly, as piece after piece dovetailed into a perfect explanation. “ I felt sorry for her and offered to do the room, but she wouldn’t let me. I see now why she refused; she had to get those dresses back into our closet.

“ Why, Grace, it’s as clear as can be! I came back to our room, that morning, after my notebook, and found Mary with a big bundle in her arms. She jumped when I opened the door. I couldn’t see what it was, because she jerked one of the sheets off the bed, and gathered it all about her. I remember thinking she was pretty rough,

and wondering if bedding would stand such treatment; then I forgot all about it."

"But what shall we do?" Grace was on the verge of tears. "Shall I send for Miss Horton?"

Belle's curved lips were set in a determined line. A bright spot of color glowed in her usually colorless cheeks — an angry, excited red.

"No! Ring the bell, Grace! Hurry, do! We'll settle this matter ourselves, and we'll do it now!"

One of the other maids answered the bell and was asked to send Mary MacFarlane to room seventeen at once. Mary responded to the summons promptly. She was often called upon to render extra service to her "young ladies," service which was always generously rewarded. She was a pale, angular girl with delicate features, and an appealing look in her light blue eyes. Her face was a pretty one, but the mouth and chin were weak.

She knocked lightly, then stepped into the room. As she saw the girls, each holding a telltale gown in her hands, she gave a frightened glance from one to the other, then turned to flee, but Belle was too quick for her. She stepped between Mary and the door, calmly turned the key in the lock, and walking over to the dressing-table, laid the key upon it.

"We know all about it, Mary," she said quietly. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"I don't know what you mean, miss!" Mary began, with an attempt at bravado.

"Yes, you do! This," pointing to the dangling program, "tells the story."

"Who says that there thing belongs to me?" the girl demanded, trying to appear righteously indignant.

"We know it belongs to you," Belle went on quietly. "And we know when you wore the dress, and when you replaced it in the closet, and — oh, Mary! we are so sorry!"

At this unexpected ending to Belle's severely begun accusation, Mary's defiance deserted her. She broke down completely, and leaning her head against the door, sobbed as though her heart would break. It was too much for the girls. The sight of this other girl, only a little older than they were, in such a serious plight, wrung their hearts. Tears stood in their eyes, as they watched her, uncertain just what to say or do.

"I never did such a thing before, Miss Gray. Honest, I didn't! Oh! I know you won't believe me, but it's true! it's true! it's true!" she wailed hopelessly.

"But we do believe you, Mary," Belle assured her gently. "I don't think you realized how wrong it was, nor the trouble you were causing us."

"Trouble?" the girl questioned dully.

"Yes, Mary. Did you know that we, Miss

Archer and I, have been accused of attending that masquerade ball? ”

“ Oh, miss! surely not! ”

“ But we were! Of course, no one here believed it, but Mrs. Vanderhoff and the Stanleigh Hall girls did, and so did Miss Sharp, at the Nook.”

Mary Mac. was sobbing violently, while Belle was speaking, the sobs shaking her thin body in a way that was pitiful to see. But she made an effort to control herself, when Belle finished.

“ I’ll tell them myself, miss. I will! I will! Not that Miss Sharp, though, because her French maid knows we were there, my sister an’ me. She was talkin’ to us.”

Grace and Belle exchanged significant glances at this bit of information about the reliable Céleste. Evidently her name was her only heavenly possession.

“ Oh! What shall I do! What shall I do! ” the poor girl moaned, as her pitiable plight was borne in upon her. “ We went to the big dance at the Town Hall, sister an’ me. You know, the night you all made candy. It was the first we ever went to, an’ we had a fine time. Then when we heard of this mask ball we was just crazy to go, because we’d never went to one like that; so one morning, when youse was out ridin’, we tried on the dresses an’ pertended we was ready. Then when we did git an invite — we — we — But

it's the first time, miss, the very first time! An' it'll be the last, too. I've just been in misery ever since. The other day when you gave me that han'some scarf, I couldn't even say thank you, I was that near cryin'. I'll never git another place now," she ended hopelessly.

Young as the girls were, they recognized the true ring of the maid's confession, and realized what this exposure would mean to her. They glanced at each other questioningly.

"But — Miss Horton — she ought to know," Grace stammered, in answer to the unspoken question.

"Yes," Belle said slowly, "Miss Horton ought to know. Look here, Mary, we believe in you, absolutely, when you say this is the first time, and that it will be the last. We are more than willing to forgive you and to let the matter drop, but Miss Horton must know the whole truth. Who will tell her?"

"I will, miss," the maid answered humbly; "but you'll have to tell everybody else to clear yerselves, an' I'll never have no other chance. Nobody'll want a — a —" Her sobs broke forth afresh.

"No, we won't have to tell the others, will we, Grace?" Belle asked earnestly. "As long as we know the truth, and Miss Horton does, we don't care what the rest think, if you are really in earnest,

Mary. But if we should let this pass, and you ever did such a thing again, we would be to blame, don't you see? "

"But I won't!" Mary spoke with impressive earnestness. "I've been so miserable. It's just spoiled everything for me. I heard you an' Miss Archer tellin' about that man that had a sword hung over his head just by a hair. That's the way I've been feelin' — like that Damo — Damo —"

"Damocles," Grace finished, with difficulty suppressing a smile, in spite of the gravity of the situation.

"You had better see Miss Horton at once, Mary," Belle suggested gently, unlocking the door as she spoke. "Tell her the whole story and ask her to keep it a secret. Tell her that we ask it, too, as a special favor to us. She's so good and kind, she'll be willing, I know, and she'll help you keep your promise, too, Mary."

The girls finished dressing very soberly, all elation over the solving of the mystery swallowed up by pity for the author of the trouble. Mary's sister had left the Academy to help with the work at home, so poor Mary had to bear the punishment alone.

"We'll never have the chance to glory over Stanleigh now," Belle sighed resignedly.

"I know it," Grace answered, with another

sigh, "but if it saves that poor girl from that sort of a life, it's worth it, a hundred times."

"I think so, too," Belle agreed softly. "This may be the turning point in her life. We'll hope so, anyway. I don't think we'll regret the sacrifice but it is a sacrifice, no doubt about that."

"No, I don't think we'll regret it," Grace echoed.

Just then there was a knock on the door, and Miss Horton entered. She was dressed in a trailing robe of soft, black silk, with a touch of fine old Duchesse lace at the neck.

"Are you sure you are willing to keep this affair a secret?" she asked, without preamble of any sort.

"Yes, Miss Horton," the girls answered simultaneously.

"Do you realize that some people will always hold the wrong impression, if no explanation is made?" she questioned gravely.

"Yes, we understand," Belle replied, "and we are willing, for Mary's sake. When she — Mrs. Vanderhoff, I mean — told you who the girls were, you knew it couldn't be true, didn't you, Miss Horton?" Belle's tone was pleadingly insistent.

"Just for an instant, Belle," Miss Horton confessed frankly, "I was uncertain. I thought of your love of acting, and remembered your clever impersonation of Grace's cousin, the day of the

tea, last year, and my heart quailed. But my good judgment reasserted itself, and one glance at your face settled my doubts forever."

"Thank you," Belle said quietly, her face beaming.

"Mary isn't really dishonest," Miss Horton went on, "but she is weak, and has had no good home influences. Since you girls are willing to hush the matter up, I have promised to give her another chance. I don't think she will fail me again. She says she has been miserable ever since she and her sister wore the dresses, and I believe her, because her looks prove it. I spoke to her the other day about her health, she looked so ill. I don't think you will regret this decision, even though it does deprive you of a chance to triumph over your accuser."

Miss Horton started to leave the room, with an approving smile at the girls, but on the threshold she paused uncertainly. She was not a demonstrative woman, but she turned back and kissed both girls affectionately.

"I am proud of you!" was all she said, but the girls felt amply rewarded.

When they finally made their way down-stairs, and entered the great dining-room, they were filled with an elation that no reader, however famous, and no cotillion, however charmingly befavored, could produce.

The guests had all arrived, and the star himself was standing in the alcove which formed the stage, talking to Miss Horton. The room looked as gay as pumpkin shades, Jack-o-lanterns, plants and flowers could make it. The seating idea had been carried out as Mary had suggested, and a long V of carriage cushions ran through the center of the room, with its point towards the stage. On these cushions sat the young people, the handsome gray uniforms of the cadets forming a pleasing background for the dainty, light dresses of the girls.

At the entrance to the dining-room stood two of the youngest scholars, their hands filled with dance-cards tied with scarlet and blue ribbons. To these small lassies the whole evening's entertainment was simply a prelude to their part in it, and they were visibly puffed up with their importance. The dance-cards were to be distributed when the reading was over, and the little girls were under bonds to retire as soon as their work was done. But the young conspirators had formed a plan which would keep to the letter of their agreement, if not to the spirit of it.

"We'll pass 'em to the girls, and the boys right away, the minute he finishes, 'cause they won't wait," said one.

"No, of course they won't!" the other replied, with a wisdom beyond her years. "They have to

get the dances filled before the good dancers are all gone. Belle Gray's card is full already! The boys wrote to her for dances! That's the way I'm going to be."

"So'm I!" was the assured response.

"We'll give out the rest of the cards ever so slowly. Let's take turns, and hand out just one each time. The old folks won't notice, if they're talking. I do so want to see them start the collition, don't you?"

Just then Colonel Arnold made his way to the small assistants, playfully tweaking one rosy ear, and pulling a temptingly dangling curl, as he inquired anxiously: "Where is he? I don't see him anywhere. Hasn't he come yet? My! my! He's very late, very! I might have given him a lift on the way over if I had thought about it. Too bad!"

"Who is it, Colonel Arnold?" the girls asked in a shrill, excited chorus. That the Colonel himself should come to them in his search for that unknown "he" added greatly to the importance of their position. But the mischievous Colonel, who never could resist a chance to tease, dashed their hopes and knocked away the props from their pride by his answer.

"Why, the Sandman! I met him on my way over, and he seemed very anxious about two of his little flock who were not in their accustomed

places. Of course you don't know anything about them: I'll have to ask some of the little girls, won't I? "

"Yes, sir," was the prompt response, as their importance once more asserted itself. "We big girls are too busy!"

The blue eyes under the mass of yellow curls fairly twinkled with glee over this shaft, and the Colonel acknowledged his defeat and retired.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MISSING LINK

As Grace and Belle made their way through the crowd in the hall, the latter frowned at sight of the two little guards at the door, and demanded quickly: "Where's Chick-a-dee? I thought she was to pass the dance-cards. I promised her positively."

"Miss Horton said she couldn't," one of the children answered. "We —"

The piano prelude began at that moment and Belle passed on, displeased and uneasy, wondering what offence the little one had committed that was sufficiently serious to rob her of this long-promised treat. The thought of Chick-a-dee's disappointment filled her heart with dull anger against Miss Horton.

"Poor little birdie!" she thought compassionately, "I'll have to make it up to her in some way. She's talked of nothing but this evening's treat for a week. I do think Miss Horton might have been more lenient: she's such a little tot."

Just before the entertainment began, Colonel Arnold made his way up to the girls, and spoke in low tones.

"I understand that the mystery is a mystery no longer," he began guardedly. Noting their involuntary start of surprise he added: "No one has broken faith. I gained my knowledge by accident, as it were. Mary MacFarlane's father was my gardener for years, so I've tried to keep an eye on his daughters. Their mother died when they were little girls and they live with the step-mother, a harsh sort of a creature, I believe. I congratulate you both, not so much on your penetration, as on the attitude you have taken in the matter."

"But Colonel, you won't —"

"Never fear, Miss Belle, I shall respect your promise to that poor girl. She herself came to me with the story."

The hearty handclasp which he bestowed upon them meant more to them than all the dainty favors he had provided for the cotillion.

The girls were perched on a window-ledge, the only available space near at hand, so the Colonel took his stand beside them, for Beth rose, at that moment, to sing. Ever since mischievous Belle had persuaded poor, embarrassed Beth to sing a solo, one morning in Assembly, Miss Barthold had spared no pains over the clear, bird-like voice of the school "canary." It was at her suggestion that Beth had spent part of the last summer studying abroad under a famous teacher.

As the clear, rich voice swelled through the room, filling hall and corridors, the audience sat breathless. Even at the close of the aria, there was no sound for an instant; then a perfect storm of applause broke forth. Beth, usually painfully shy, stepped smilingly to the piano, to answer the persistent encore. In this, her chosen work, she forgot self completely.

When she opened her music, preparatory to singing a simple little ballad, a notice on the back of the page caught the eye of the Eustis boys. It was printed in huge letters, of startling black, easily read across the room. An involuntary ripple of amusement spread through their ranks, for the words displayed to such advantage were the advertisement of one of the season's "popular" songs, with the charming title: "Let 'Er Go!"

The boys remembered themselves instantly, but Beth had caught the laughing ripple, and understood its cause. Quick as a flash she switched over the page, and went on with her song, a humorous ballad, without the faintest show of embarrassment, receiving an enthusiastic ovation at its close.

It was an auspicious beginning for the evening. The audience settled back in their seats complacently — the older part, that is; any settling back of the younger ones would have been disastrous. Like children who sleep three in a bed,

it was move all together or not at all, for them! But both young and old were prepared to enjoy the reading.

Just as the humorist began, in his quiet, almost solemn manner, which the twinkling eyes under their bushy brows belied, a tiny note was passed quietly from hand to hand through the audience, finally reaching the window-ledge where Grace and Belle were ensconced.

"Miss Gray" was the superscription, and Belle opened it lazily, thinking it referred to some trifle overlooked in the final arrangements for the dance. Her laziness vanished as she read it. Her face clouded, and an involuntary "Oh!" left her lips. Then, without a word of apology or explanation, she made her way from the room as rapidly as its crowded condition permitted.

When the reader had given one selection after another, each, if possible, more enjoyable than the last, and all genuinely humorous, the formal part of the program was declared over. In a trice the gray coats were flying about, removing chairs and cushions, ready for the dancing.

The eager little card-bearers were decidedly deliberate in the distribution of their precious burdens, after they had satisfied the first mad rush of the younger ones. By careful management they succeeded in eluding capture until after the dance was in full swing. Even then, the maid who

took possession of them smuggled them into the pantry, and regaled them with creamed chicken and ices shaped like jack-o-lanterns, with a piece of cake and a handful of bon-bons "for to-morrow." It may not have been a hygienic proceeding on her part, but it was amply satisfying to the two children.

Several cadets marched up and down the long room, programs in hand, eagerly scrutinizing the "wall-flowers" along the way. They did not tell the public at large the object of their quest, but one of them, "Chopsy," otherwise John Armstrong, in despair sought the Colonel.

"Where's Miss Gray?" he whispered anxiously. "I wrote to her, so I know she's saved some dances for me. I'm not going to fill up my card until she comes."

The boy had trained down much of his "too, too solid flesh," and looked trim and handsome in his uniform. He was one of the best dancers in the military school.

"Miss Gray doesn't hesitate to call a fellow down hard," Chopsy informed the Colonel, with boyish frankness, "if she thinks he needs it. She made me start training down. She says she don't like fat people. She's a splendid dancer, the best I ever saw. The prettiest, too!"

The Colonel approached Miss Horton with the same question the boys had put to him.

“Miss Gray? She will be here presently,” that lady answered confidently. “Nothing would keep Belle away from a dance, you know.”

Thus reassured, the boys sought some of the other girls, still reserving choice spaces on their cards for the errant favorite. But as the evening slipped away, and still no Miss Gray appeared, several indignant youths retired from the floor in high dudgeon. They stood somewhat in awe of Miss Horton, who, with all her gentleness could be very severe, upon occasion, so they proceeded to make life miserable for the defenseless Colonel.

“Miss Horton,” the Colonel suggested finally, either taking pity on the insistent clan, or in sheer self-defense, “will you kindly send a search-warrant after the ‘missing link,’ otherwise Miss Belle? Look, and take pity!” waving his hand laughingly towards the doorway to the hall, where Chopsy and several companions stood, fairly glowering upon the innocent dancers. “Those young gentlemen will fail to reap any benefit from your graciously accorded festivity, if something is not done soon to relieve the tension of their feelings.”

Miss Horton smiled at his nonsense, but her smile became a hearty laugh as she turned towards the doorway. There stood Chopsy clutching one of the choicest favors, a dainty fan, and gazing upon the passing dancers with a face like a thunder-

cloud. Near him were three other "dancing men," each armed with a favor, and each surveying his little world through darkened glasses.

"Please come to their rescue," the Colonel pleaded.

For an instant she hesitated. She knew of nothing in the arrangements for the evening that could detain Belle in this way. She scanned the floor anxiously for the rest of the committee. Yes! there they were! all dancing merrily, showing that they were thoroughly enjoying life just at that moment, with no cloud of unfinished arrangements to mar their pleasure. As soon as the two-step ended, she motioned to Grace, who came to her immediately.

"Where is Belle?" she asked sharply. "Ever so many have asked for her. You don't think that she — she is not angry at anything, is she?"

Belle's quick temper was her worst enemy and Miss Horton was bending every energy, not towards subduing the temper, but towards making Belle herself subdue it. Of late the fits of angry, unreasonable resentment had been of such infrequent occurrence that she hesitated even to suggest such a thing.

"I don't know, Miss Horton," Grace answered. "I hadn't noticed that she was not dancing. But I'm sure it's not anything of that sort," she added loyally. "I'll run up to our room and see."

With a hasty excuse to her next partner, who was waiting to claim her, Grace disappeared, and before she returned, searched not only room seventeen but every place where Belle might possibly be found. Then she remembered the note that had been passed at the beginning of the reading.

"She went out the minute she read that note," she explained to Miss Horton, then hurried back to her impatient partner in time to dance the last few bars of her favorite two-step.

Miss Horton was really angry, so sure was she that Belle's absence was caused by a fit of girlish pique. She was old enough now, she thought, not to act so childishly! She deserved to be severely punished for it! Yet, after all, if Belle preferred to absent herself, was there any compulsion about a dance?

The good lady was forced to dismiss the complicated question, and give her attention to her guests; but all through the remainder of the evening an irritating feeling of resentment made its presence felt in her mind. Possibly this very irritation made her refuse more decidedly than she might otherwise have done, the eager chorus of requests for "Just one more, Miss Horton, please!" with which Stanleigh, Eustis, and Fairmount besieged her.

"No! no more!" she announced firmly, as the

orchestra broke forth into the familiar strains of *Home, Sweet Home*. "You may waltz to this number if you wish," she ended more graciously.

"Keep it up! Keep it up!" the Eustis boys adjured the orchestra as they whirled by, while their partners smiled at the musicians over the gray-clad shoulders. "She's busy; she won't notice!"

And they did! Never was *Home, Sweet Home* so long drawn out. Not until the electric lights were switched off, leaving the musicians unable to see their instruments in the soft yellow glow of the pumpkin-lanterns, did the young enthusiasts acknowledge that the end had come.

"It's been just the jolliest evening," Miss Gerry assured Mary. "I don't know when I've had so much fun. And see my favors! I have a frieze of them around my room. I'll have to start on my mirror-frame next."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Mary answered heartily. "The readings were splendid, weren't they? It was good of him to give us such a treat."

"I — I wanted to tell you, Miss Livingston," Miss Gerry confessed, stammering in her embarrassment, her face an uncomfortable red, "that the — the regrets we sent were — a — a mistake."

"Thank you," Mary replied simply.

"We talked it over," Miss Gerry went on hurriedly, "and we feel sure that you'll find the explanation of the matter some day. I hate to acknowl-

edge it, but we have felt so ashamed of the time we 'appropriated' your dear little mascot, that we rather jumped at this chance to put you in the wrong. There! I feel better now! Honest confession's good for the soul, after all!"

The two girls clasped hands in smiling good-fellowship. At that moment Mary realized the wisdom of Miss Horton's attitude in regard to the Love Feast. By following her advice, the custom which for years had linked the two schools in friendly intercourse remained unbroken.

This was not the only interchange of confidences. Chopsy hung around Grace, watching his chance to find her alone. When he at last succeeded, he beckoned to her boyishly and she followed him into the comparative seclusion of the great bay window in the hall, where the pedestal and several palms made a screen from prying eyes. After they were safely within this haven, the boy seemed to find some difficulty in unburdening his mind. Finally he pushed the fan he had been clutching all the evening into Grace's hand, and blurted out: "It's for her! Tell her I sent it!" Then he dashed away as though the fate of nations hung upon his speedy departure. Grace started to follow him, but was once more detained. This particular cadet seemed blessed with a flow of language as generous as Chopsy's had been meagre.

"Will Miss Archer kindly undertake a commission for me?" he began impressively.

Miss Archer signified her willingness to comply, although the idea of becoming an "undertaker," made her long to laugh.

"It has occurred to me," the lad went on, as though he were delivering an oration in a prize-speaking contest, "that if — if any of the young ladies happened to miss this dance, they — she — she'd be very much disappointed, you know, so I thought I — that is —"

"I know one who has missed it," Grace interrupted mischievously. "She expected to be here, and I'm sure she's dreadfully disappointed."

"Then if you will kindly communicate to her my deep regret at her non-appearance, and will present her with this little token —"

He held out a favor carefully wrapped in a gaudy paper napkin, and tied with the ribbons from several dance-cards. Grace took the package, remarking carelessly: "Chick-a-dee will be delighted, I'm sure."

"But — but I — I didn't mean that one," the boy stammered so anxiously that Grace relented.

"I might present it to my chum, Miss Gray," she hazarded thoughtfully.

"Thank you," was the grateful reply. "Tell her it's from Stockton. She'll know. Here, give her my dance-card, too. I want her to see those empty

spaces so she'll know I — we missed her. Good night."

Miss Horton, too, was the recipient of a most unexpected but welcome confidence. As Miss Sharp reached the door, on her way to her carriage, she turned back again, and swept up to her hostess with the words: "I appreciated the girls' invitation for this entertainment more than I can express, and I feel sure, from what I have seen of your school this evening, that I was altogether wrong in my charge. Céleste has made a mistake, that's all! Good night!"

When the Stanleigh omnibus had rolled down the drive with its merry load, and the last gray-coated cadet had bashfully gripped Miss Horton's hand in an attempt to thank her for his evening's pleasure, Grace suddenly became conscience-stricken, and hurried up-stairs in search of her missing friend. Belle's evening dress lay in a fluffy heap upon the couch, her white slippers were tossed upon the armchair, her fan, necklace and handkerchief littered the dressing-table. Only her flowers, a beautiful bunch of roses from the Arnold conservatory, which the Colonel had gallantly presented to each of the committee, were carefully arranged in a large vase of water, and placed upon the cool window-ledge. The bed had not been touched.

Grace stared at its unruffled counterpane with

genuine dismay. She debated what course to pursue all the time she was slipping out of her dress. Finally she decided to go to Miss Horton, and gathering a soft silk kimona about her, she started for the door, but a card pinned upon it caught her eye. The inscription was very much to the point.

“NOTE ON DRESSING - TABLE!”

She hurried over, and there, upon the pin tray, unnoticed before, in the midst of the festive litter, lay a hastily scribbled note.

“Don’t tell Miss Horton if you can help it, please; at least not to-night, because she’s all tired out. Besides, she wouldn’t be allowed — Chick-a-dee’s sick and I’m staying with her. Hang up my things, like the orderly angel you are. Good night.

“BELLE.”

“‘She wouldn’t be allowed —’” Grace repeated the tantalizingly unfinished sentence, much mystified. She at once set to work to carry out Belle’s orders, however; the slippers, and all the dainty girlish accessories were carefully placed in their proper receptacles, and the dress arranged upon its silk-covered hanger, before she attended to her own possessions.

"And to think that she missed such a beautiful dance just because Chick-a-dee wanted her," Grace thought as she prepared for bed. "And the Angel was with the birdie, too. Belle's the queerest girl; she's hard when you don't expect it, and gentle when you think she'll be hard! Not many girls would give up a dance like the one this evening, after all our work too, just to humor a little girl. Poor little Chick-a-dee! I suppose her cold is worse, and Miss Horton wouldn't let her pass the dance-cards, so Belle stayed up-stairs to console her. I don't believe I could have done it; I really don't."

Just then there came a light tap upon the door. Grace yawned sleepily as she answered it.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Miss Archer, — Sarah," one of the maids answered, with a fine disregard for the rules of syntax. "Miss Horton says she wants to know if Miss Gray's all right. She is very tired, but she'll come if she's needed."

There was a perceptible pause, then Grace answered slowly: "Tell Miss Horton she needn't come, Sarah. Miss Gray's all right. Good night." She crept into bed, but just as she was snuggling into the covers, she remembered that she had not said her prayers, and sprang out again, remorsefully. As she fell asleep her last connected thought was: "Poor Belle! to miss such a splendid time!"

Then there followed a jumble of music and Jack-o-lanterns, dances and favors, chicken patês and fancy ices. She was just smiling sweetly into the eyes of a tall cadet who was presenting to her a huge dish of bon-bons, when something warm and bright fell across her face. She stirred uneasily, made a frantic grab at the bon-bons which seemed slipping away from her, then awoke to find the sun streaming over her from the east window, whose shade she had forgotten to lower in the excitement of the evening before.

CHAPTER XIV

TROUBLE

GRACE dressed for breakfast the next morning, with a queer feeling of loneliness. She and Belle had roomed together ever since they entered the Academy. They were never far apart at Fairmount, and seldom separated even during vacation. It suddenly came over her how much her friend had entered into her life, and how greatly she contributed to its pleasures.

Many people misunderstood Belle. Her prompt retorts, her quick resentment, her girlish aggressiveness, all conduced to this misunderstanding. She had her full share of temper, but each outburst was followed by quick repentance in sackcloth and ashes: no half-way measures about Belle.

“That chile, she jest plain sassy, she is,” her old colored Mammy used to say; “but her heart ain’t sassy, no indeedy!”

Nevertheless, in spite of the innocence of that particular organ, the devoted old nurse used to ply her slipper vigorously, when occasion warranted. Miss Horton, too, with all her love for the impulsive warm-hearted Southerner, used the

slipper's more dignified equivalent, stern reproof, in softening the undue aggressiveness, and bringing to the surface the lovable nature hidden beneath its crusty layer.

"Never trouble trouble, till trouble troubles you," Grace hummed lightly, in an attempt to shake off the feeling of oppression.

The second gong was sounding, as she sped down the corridor, dashed into the dining-room, and reached her place at the table before its echoes died away. But her haste was unnecessary, as far as Miss Horton was concerned, for the head of the table was empty, and remained so all during breakfast. Miss Bronson asked the blessing, and before the "Amen" was really ended, a merry chatter burst forth, as the events of the previous evening were retold for the general amusement and edification.

"Isn't Belle lazy this morning!" Mary commented, suddenly noticing the empty chair. "I'm ashamed of her. It would take more than one little dance to affect me. Why didn't you make her get up, Grace?"

Grace laughed, but refused to commit herself.

"Evidently Miss Horton is feeling the effects of the evening's dissipation, too," Mary went on. "I never knew her to miss breakfast before, when she's here. I'm anxious to thank her for the good time she gave us."

"So am I!" and "Ditto!" were the hearty responses all about the table.

"And we ought to thank the Colonel, too," Edie added. "The favors were as pretty as they could be. This is one of mine." She pointed to a tiny, gilded slipper fastened to her blouse by a bow of white ribbon.

"Would you like to have it filled with rice, Edie?" drawled Lilian. "Perhaps you may, some day."

"Don't you worry, Lilian!" Edie flashed back promptly; "it will be filled, all right. I didn't see you dancing, last night. What was the matter?"

"I — I was feeling a little tired, so when any of the cadets asked me for a dance, I offered to sit it out with him."

There was a shout of laughter at this characteristic reply. For once, Lilian resented it.

"She made Mahomet come to the mountain," Edie whispered softly to her nearest neighbor, but low as the tone was, Lilian overheard it.

"You're right, Edie, I did!" she answered defiantly. "Five Mahomets came, and they brought their offerings with them." They certainly had. Two of the dainty favors swung from her wrist, one pretty star-shaped ornament decorated her fluffy pompadour, and two more were fastened to her blouse.

"I heard one of the cadets say something very nice about you, Lilian," Mary began, with a mischievous smile. "He said you were not a 'fusser' like some girls, and he'd rather sit out with you, than dance with some of the others. It was a compliment worth having, I think, because he's one of the best dancers at Eustis. I'll tell you who it was," she added wickedly; "it was that tall, handsome friend of Lorimer's; his name is Lawrence, I think; the one you had the argument with, Edie."

Lilian smiled in a pleased fashion, but Edie's face became uncomfortably flushed.

"I'll get even with you, my lady," she promised laughingly, "for telling tales out of school."

"Out of school?" questioned Mary, in well-feigned astonishment. "But this is in school, isn't it, girls? I just gave you a dose of your own medicine. You didn't seem to like it, did she, Lilian?"

Just then the waitress leaned over Grace's shoulder and told her that Miss Horton wished to speak to her as soon as she had finished breakfast. Grace rose at once, leaving her cereal untasted, and excused herself to the girls. Her heart beat fast, as she hurried to obey the summons. The queer little foreboding which had been troubling her took on definite shape when she entered the study, and found Miss Horton

pacing back and forth restlessly, her face drawn and anxious.

"When did you find out where Belle was?" she demanded, as soon as Grace appeared.

"Not until bedtime, Miss Horton, when I went to our room after the dance," Grace answered.

"Why did you not come to me at once, or tell the maid when I sent to inquire?"

"Belle asked me not to in the note she left. She said you were tired, and ought not to be disturbed unnecessarily. You are not angry with her are you, Miss Horton?"

"Angry with her? No! but I wish I had known in time to prevent —" Miss Horton left her sentence unfinished.

"Prevent what?" Grace asked sharply, trembling with dread.

"I may as well tell you, Grace. You will have to know sooner or later, I suppose, but I hope it can be kept from the school. I fear it will be impossible, though. It is about Chick-a-dee."

In her anxiety, Miss Horton unconsciously used the pet name which Belle had bestowed upon the small lassie.

"Is she worse? Is she seriously ill?" Grace questioned, with trembling lips. "Oh! how selfish I've been! I thought it was just a little cold, and I actually blamed Belle for giving in to

her, and missing the dance. What is the matter, Miss Horton? ”

“ We — the nurse fears — ” She stopped and listened intently. The chug-chug of a motor was distinctly heard from the driveway, followed by the ringing of the door-bell. Miss Horton hurried out to intercept the doctor. Grace could not help overhearing the conversation which followed.

“ Why was I not informed of this, last night? ” The lady demanded anxiously, when the doctor stopped in the hall to remove his coat, before going up to the infirmary.

“ Because the nurse and Miss Gray voted to spare you needless anxiety,” was the quiet response. “ If it proves to be what Miss Hampton fears, you can not be allowed to enter the sick-room, you know.”

“ But Belle — Miss Gray? Why was she permitted to stay? ” Miss Horton’s sharp tone betrayed her harassed condition.

“ It wasn’t a case of permit with that young lady,” Doctor Harmsworth answered grimly. “ She stayed! ”

“ But why was she allowed to enter the room in the first place? If I cannot go to the infirmary I must get my information from you.”

“ I took the nurse to task for that myself,” the doctor answered. “ She was not to blame, I find. The little girl was fretting bitterly over her

disappointment about the party, and crying for her friend. To pacify her, and help her get to sleep, Miss Hampton sent a note to Miss Gray, distinctly requesting her to send back word that she was unable to go up that night, but would do so in the morning. Instead of which Miss Gray went up at once, and there she is! ”

“ Yet Belle loves dancing more than any girl in the Academy! ” Miss Horton murmured.

“ This was before any alarming symptoms developed,” the doctor went on. “ When they did, Miss Gray absolutely refused to leave. I myself expostulated with her, later, but she told me, quite simply, that Chick-a-dee is an orphan, and needed her, and she intended to stay. I have taken every precaution, you may depend upon that. My last visit, at midnight, made me reasonably sure that it is not scarlet fever. To-day, I trust, will confirm this.”

“ Thank you, doctor. Poor little Gertrude! I will not detain you any longer. If it should prove to be contagious, and Belle suffers, I do not know how I can answer to her people. The only girl, you know, and simply idolized by her father and those big brothers of hers, while her stepmother spoils her worst of all.”

There were tears in Miss Horton’s eyes as she spoke. The doctor fully comprehended her posi-

tion and answered cheerily, as he started up the stairs: "We won't cross our bridges until we come to them."

The infirmary was a large, airy, many-windowed room at the top of the house, with eastern, southern and western exposure. It was fully equipped, and Miss Hampton, the trained nurse, was equal to any emergency, from a simple cut or bruise, to a serious illness. Such illnesses had been of very infrequent occurrence at Fairmount, for Miss Horton firmly believed in the celebrated "ounce of prevention," but the infirmary was always ready. It was so cheery and restful, and Miss Hampton was so motherly and "comfy," that one or two cases of "make-believe" found their way in, from time to time, to be cuddled and coddled a bit, and sent away cured.

"Sometimes they really need a bit of mothering," the nurse explained earnestly. She was a large, comfortable looking woman, one of those calm unruffled natures that never "set a river on fire," but rather help it keep its course in a seemly manner. No wonder the girls called her the "Angel" and the infirmary, the "Seventh Heaven!" "High and peaceful, you know," Belle described it.

When Doctor Harmsworth entered, and bowed gravely to the Angel and Belle, little Chick-a-dee greeted him with a regular shower of chatter,

chatter which the mounting fever made almost unintelligible. The child, bright-eyed, high-colored, talked in painful little gasps, always on the same theme.

"Belle's going — to stay — with me. I want her. She's my — big sister — my pretending big sister. When I — get well — she's going to let me — make fudge — in her chafing-dish. She's going — to stay with me — all the time, aren't you, Belle? You mustn't — send her away — doctor. Angel tried to — but Belle wouldn't go. She's promised, so you mustn't make her — tell a lie. You mustn't! You mustn't! You mustn't!"

In spite of the doctor's efforts the child prattled on, getting more and more excited every moment. The irregular pulse, the rapid breathing, the gasping utterances, and mounting fever all told their pitiful story to his practised eye.

"Will the little girl be quiet and not talk, if I let Miss Belle stay?" he asked gently, when Chick-a-dee paused from sheer exhaustion. He was holding the hot, dry little hand in his, and was studying the flushed face as he spoke. "You see, little girlie," he went on softly, "I'll be obliged to send her away if you don't do as I say, and promise not to talk. No!" as the little girl started to speak, "not one word! Not one! Just nod your head, or wink one eye, when we ask you a question. You promise?"

The child winked her answer, smiling at the doctor's plan.

"That's good! Now I shall let her stay."

While the doctor was making his examination, Chick-a-dee pressed one hand against her hot, dry lips, in determined effort to keep her promise. Belle stood by quietly, and listened to the directions as carefully as the nurse herself. The doctor noted her grave restraint, and marveled at the control shown by such an active, effervescing nature. As he prepared to take his departure, he motioned to her to follow him. Belle saw Chick-a-dee's anxious start, and leaned over the child, saying reassuringly: "I'm just going into the ante-room with the doctor, so that he can tell me about your medicines. I'll be right back, honey-gal. Remember your promise, won't you?"

The anxious look left the childish face, and the bright eyes winked a prompt reply.

"Has Chick-a-dee any relatives?" the doctor asked quietly, as soon as the door of the infirmary was closed.

"Why?" Belle asked sharply, the ugly significance of the question striking a chill to her heart.

"Because they ought to be informed. It is pneumonia. Both lungs are affected, and the child has little vitality to draw on."

Belle's eyes filled with tears, but she sternly repressed them.

"She's an orphan. There's no relative near, except an uncle at Columbia College — a mere boy, I believe. She is to live with me by and by," Belle choked over the sinister thought which the words brought to her, but went on bravely. "The aunt who placed her here lives in South America, miles away from any town. Her husband owns mines there. This uncle has been down there, too, I think Chick-a-dee said, but he's expected soon."

"Telegraph the college, please, and try to reach him. I'll send a night nurse to relieve Miss Hampton. No one else is to enter the room. You must spare yourself as much as possible. Miss Horton is very much concerned about you. I should forbid your staying, only I know how much the patient depends upon you."

"She's the dearest little tot, Doctor," Belle said in low, choked tones. "The whole school loves her, but she's been my own special pet ever since she came. I — I —" she lost her self-control for a moment, and sobbed heartbrokenly. The doctor patted her shoulder, soothingly, and let her cry it out.

"I know," he said gently. "My wife has told me about the beautiful friendship between you. She will be glad to find one of her Sunday-school class so willing to sacrifice comfort and pleasure for the sake of a lonely child. 'If ye do it unto

one of the least of these — ’ ” he murmured reverently. “ Good-by, Miss Belle. We expect a struggle, but we’ll never give up the ship! ”

Somewhat comforted, Belle returned to the sick-room.

The struggle proved to be even harder than the doctor anticipated. The next few days and nights were full of heart-breaking misery. Such an unequal struggle! The fragile child, never strong at best, was no match for the dread disease in its most pitiless phase. Nothing was spared that professional zeal or tender love could suggest, but the result seemed hopeless almost from the start.

Down-stairs the various classes dragged through their allotted time. More than one was silently dismissed, owing to a sudden burst of grief from some small companion of Chick-a-dee’s. Even the older girls sometimes lost control of themselves as they thought of the childish sufferer, fighting against such overwhelming odds. For Chick-a-dee was the school “ baby,” a loving, gentle, little creature, baby in name only. She was not only self-reliant, but even motherly in her attitude towards the other little girls. The scholars tried to pass the time in the gymnasium, the squash court, or the laboratory, any place where they could keep busy during the hours usually devoted to play. But the pervading gloom followed them everywhere. The telephone rang again and again

with anxious inquiries for the little patient. Much as the child was loved at the Academy, the host of friends she had made in the neighborhood surprised them all.

“Don’t you remember,” Mary said sadly to the group of girls gathered disconsolately in one of the windows in Liberty Hall, “how Chick-a-dee longed to be big enough to take part in the plays? She told Belle once, that she ‘lived in the future,’ and now —”

“Poor Belle!” Grace sighed. “It’s hard for us, but it’s ten times harder for her. That child just worshipped her. Belle always said that as soon as she graduated she was going to ask the aunt to give Chick-a-dee to her. She intended to adopt her, legally, you know. Belle has money of her own, so she could do it. Chick-a-dee is independent, too, I believe. Her aunt lives in some forlorn place in South America, dreadfully uncivilized and unhealthy. That’s why the child was allowed to come here so much younger than the usual age for entering. Oh, dear!”

Meanwhile Belle and the Angel never gave up hope, even though the reports from the sick-room offered little encouragement. The second nurse relieved the latter of part of the burden, but Belle was always at hand, even sleeping upon the couch in the ante-room.

A telegram had been sent to Chick-a-dee’s uncle,

in care of Columbia. The answer brought the news that he was on the ocean then. His boat had been sighted and was due in New York the following day. At once the wireless flashed its message to him, bringing in return the assurance that he would be with them at the earliest possible moment after his arrival. Unfortunately a severe coast-storm caused a delay of twelve hours; then the ship was obliged to anchor off Quarantine, owing to several suspicious cases of illness which had appeared in cabin and steerage. As it might be several days before it would be granted a clean bill of health, the delay would have been maddening, had not a strenuous pulling of wires enabled the anxious young man to escape this detention, and hurry up the bay as fast as his chartered tug could carry him.

CHAPTER XV

THE SCHOOL BEAUTY

By the time the crisis was reached, even Doctor Harmsworth himself showed the effects of the battle. His face was haggard; his whole expression lacked its habitual calm hopefulness. He had the success of this case very much at heart, even while he acknowledged that the chances were all against recovery. In Belle's colorless cheeks a red spot of excitement burned, and the strain of the last few days showed in her tightly compressed lips, and the nervous clenching and unclenching of her hands.

There was so little to be done. Everything had been tried, and everything had failed. The anxious watchers, both in the sick-room and out, had reached the hardest stage of all, the stage when waiting takes the place of working.

"There is just one chance in a hundred," the doctor declared, in answer to Belle's unspoken question. "If — I don't say it will be so, remember — but if one lung clears before the other, ever so slightly, there is hope, but —"

There was no need to finish the sentence: its

dreary meaning was evident enough. Belle set her teeth hard, and turned towards the sick-room with a heart even heavier than before. Just as she reached the door, the outer door opened and a young man came into the ante-room. There was no need to ask who he was: his anxious eyes and hurried entrance spoke for themselves.

"Miss Gray?" he questioned, grasping Belle's outstretched hand in a grip which made her wince. "I am Winton, Harvey Winton, Gertrude's uncle. I came on as rapidly as I could, but everything seemed leagued against me. Miss Horton tried to seem hopeful, but — How is she?"

"She — she is —" Belle was unable to finish her sentence.

The young man walked over to the window, and gazed out in silence for a moment, but saw nothing of the hills and river upon which he looked. Belle could see the effort he was making for self-control.

"Is there no hope?" he whispered hoarsely, after what seemed like an age of mournful silence.

"Yes, there is!" Belle answered harshly. "We haven't given up hope, and we won't! we won't!"

"Look here, Miss Gray," the young fellow said bluntly, "this has been a pretty tough ordeal for you. I don't know how to thank you. The 'mite' used to write whole letters about you,

so I feel as though I had known you as long as she has. How that child loved you!"

"Dear little Chick-a-dee!"

"What's that? Is that what you call her?"

"Yes," Belle replied softly. "I named her that just for fun, when she first came. She' was such a bright little thing, always hopping about, so eager and interested in everything. She's the youngest pupil here, you know, but she isn't a bit spoiled as some children would be with so much petting, not a bit! No one ever calls her Gertrude now; she's Chick-a-dee to us all."

The two softly entered the infirmary, where Miss Hampton greeted the young man with a warm clasp of the hand, but no spoken word. As the day wore on and the end of the struggle seemed inevitable, all pretence at school work ceased. The girls remained quietly in their rooms, or huddled together in little groups, praying silent but fervent prayers that the little life might be spared. One or two of the older scholars spoke of the morning's Assembly, realizing as never before the full strength and beauty of their principal's religion.

In the infirmary, doctor, nurse, relative and friend simply waited, while each gasping breath racked their hearts. It was not until five had boomed out from the great clock in the office, that the slightest change was observable. Even

then it was apparent only to the doctor's keen vision. While the last stroke still vibrated upon the air, he bent over the child, listening intently to the labored breathing. As he stood erect once more, the eager watchers fairly started at the look which overspread his face, a look which seemed to glorify it.

Belle stepped closer, questioning him with her whole heart in her great dark eyes.

"There is a change in the breathing," he whispered softly; "the very slightest, but any gain at a time like this means much."

An hour later he rose from the examination with the triumphant announcement: "She has passed the crisis; there is hope now!"

It seemed as though a great black shadow passed away from Fairmount, when the good news was told down-stairs; told fearfully, at first, as though afraid to arouse hopes that might be grievously disappointed the next moment. But the improvement in the little patient was sure, though tantalizingly slow, and soon the Academy walls again echoed to merry, girlish laughter and rushing footsteps. But the Assembly the next morning was so solemnly impressive, that the girls never forgot it.

A week later a haggard-looking girl appeared at the table, and in some of her classes. The absence of color in her pale cheeks meant nothing,

as Belle had color only when excited; but the usually clear complexion showed a most unusual pallor, and the bright face looked tired and worn.

"Is that the Miss Gray who is considered such a beauty?" a caller asked Miss Horton curiously, shaking her head in disappointment. "Why, I heard that she was the ideal Southerner, simply glowing with life and spirits. Hm!"

"That's the Miss Gray," Miss Horton responded softly. "And to us she is more beautiful than ever before."

She motioned to Belle, who was passing, and said kindly: "I have excused you from the Botany class, dear. Tell Peter to saddle the horses and take a brisk ride. It will do you good. You can study nature at close range. Mary may be excused also, if you wish."

Belle's beaming smile and eager acceptance of the privilege thanked the lady amply for her thoughtfulness. She hurried to find Mary and tell her of the treat in store, for both girls loved to ride, and both were accomplished horsewomen. But even in her eager haste, she remembered that Chick-a-dee was expecting her, and took time to go up to the infirmary before getting into her habit.

It was indeed a "Seventh Heaven," with a very placid, motherly "Angel" in charge, and a wan little patient as its center of attraction. The

room was bright with flowers, pillows, and knick-knacks. Numberless games, toys, and books decorated every available table or chair, for the whole Academy had laid its offering at the feet of the "baby," to while away the tedious hours of convalescence.

There were gay-colored beads to string, paper mats to weave, soldiers and sailors to cut out and arrange in their grooved wooden stands. Paint boxes and crayons were ready to decorate the costumes of the wonderfully gowned ladies in various fashion books; and, better than all these, some older friend of Chick-a-dee's was ever at hand to read the *St. Nicholas*, or *Under the Lilacs*, or to play a game of Parchesi, Dominoes, Checkers, Rex, or Old Maid. The little girl must have become wonderfully proficient in all these games judging by the number of them she won!

As Belle flew up the stairs, Miss Horton turned again to her visitor, and told her the story of Chick-a-dee's illness.

"While we have the utmost faith in the Angel, our trained nurse, you know, and in the doctor, we all feel that Belle herself contributed largely to the little one's recovery. Her presence, and her loving attentions, made the child fight for life when she might otherwise have given up. It is so sometimes, don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do!" was the decided reply. "Look!

There she comes! How different she looks when she is animated! I take back what I said; she is pretty, very!"

She pointed to the stairs. Mary and Belle were descending arm-in-arm, discussing something with much warmth. They were dressed in their riding-habits, with crops swinging lightly from their wrists. At the foot of the stairs they paused to pull on their heavy riding gauntlets, while they waited for the horses.

Mr. Winton, also in riding clothes, had just come down from the infirmary, and was waiting at the window in Liberty Hall for his horse to be brought around. He had taken quarters at the Inn near by, and spent hours each day with his little niece. His college work was not neglected, however, for at Miss Horton's suggestion, he was spending a part of each day with a tutor.

As he caught sight of the girls, he started towards them eagerly.

"May I join the expedition?" he asked smilingly. "I'm a poor, forlorn stranger in these parts, and it's hard to find my way about alone. Won't you take pity on a fellow?"

"You look very forlorn, very!" Belle said laughingly, as her quick eye took in the immaculate riding costume, up-to-date in every particular. "Are all Columbia men so humble?"

“ Under similar conditions I think you would find them equally abject,” he retorted. “ May I join you? ”

“ But we are really taking our Botany lesson on this ride, so I hardly think — ”

“ Botany? Good! My tutor told me only this morning that I must devote more time to Botany. Quite a coincidence, isn’t it? ”

“ Very much so! ” Mary responded. “ Are you sure he said just that? ”

“ Possibly not in those words,” young Winton admitted reluctantly, “ but he meant practically that. He was speaking of the ‘ nearer to Nature’s heart ’ and all that sort of business, so I might as well begin to study the old lady’s works now as any time. Never put off till to-morrow what you much prefer doing right this minute! ” he ended audaciously.

The trio laughed heartily as they started towards the door, through whose glass they saw Peter approach, leading the three horses. As they passed the reception-room where Miss Horton was entertaining her caller, a sudden thought brought Belle to a standstill.

“ Have you secured your permit yet? ” she asked Harvey gravely.

“ My permit? What do you think I am? An automobile? ”

“ Oh, no! you are perfectly free to use the roads

around Fairmount without being tagged, but —” Belle paused impressively, “not — in — the — present — company!”

Winton stared at her for a moment uncomprehendingly, then his hearty laugh rang out as the joke dawned upon him.

“Where shall I fasten my tag when I get it?” he asked. “New York license number —?”

“If you knew Miss Horton as well as we do,” Belle informed him seriously, “you’d say ‘if I get it,’ wouldn’t he, Mary?”

“He certainly would,” was the brief but emphatic response.

“That settles it; I’m off! Wish me luck, please. Do I look properly plaintive and subdued?” He drew down his mouth, and put on a mournful expression, then marched in to the attack with an assurance which he was far from feeling. The caller had just left, so he approached Miss Horton, hat in hand, bowing gallantly, but there was a mischievous look on his face.

“Good morning, Miss Horton. Chick-a-dee has asked me to get her one of those brass-punching sets. Is it all right for her to have it? If so, I’ll order one to-day.”

“If Miss Hampton has given permission, it is all right,” Miss Horton answered readily. “Off for your tutoring, I suppose?”

“N-no! That is, I’m not feeling quite up to

the mark to-day, so I — I rather thought I'd ride awhile this morning."

"That's a good idea," Miss Horton nodded approvingly. "Nothing like it for restoring one's energy."

"But — I see that two of the g — young ladies are just starting out," he added suggestively.

Miss Horton preserved a disconcerting silence.

"Perhaps you would like me to escort them," he went on, desperately.

"No, thank you, Mr. Winton. I couldn't think of taking your time. Peter will take charge of them."

Miss Horton was fully aware of the young man's desire. She had taken a great liking to him, not only for his genuine devotion to his small niece but for his own sake. At the same time she was not particularly anxious to have the girls escorted by him. The Eustis cadets would be asking for the privilege next. Then, too, she had discovered his love of teasing, and rather enjoyed paying him in his own coin. But she relented as she caught sight of the disappointed look which spread over his handsome face.

"I — I thought that perhaps the horses might be restive from their lack of exercise," he added lamely. "They may need to be controlled. If you will permit me —"

"I have the utmost confidence in my groom," Miss Horton remarked drily.

"Oh yes, certainly! of course! but two restive horses —"

"The young ladies in question are more than a match for their horses," she told him decisively. "If you had ever seen them ride you would have no further anxiety on that score."

He turned away in disappointment, but Miss Horton detained him.

"Since you are kind enough to be willing to sacrifice your time in this way," her twinkling eyes belied the grave expression of her face as she spoke, "I will gladly avail myself of your services; but as Peter's assistant, remember!"

"Thank you," Winton replied gaily, wringing her hand with boyish fervor, as he added in an undertone: "not only for this but for your goodness to my little niece. I can never thank you — and Miss Gray — enough, but you understand. Good-by."

He returned to the girls and informed them triumphantly: "I've got my tag, Fairmount license number 3! but I had to fight for it."

Miss Horton watched the laughing trio, as they ran down the steps. Mischievous Belle had printed a sign with a conspicuous 3 upon it, and surreptitiously fastened it to the back of young Winton's riding-coat where it dangled

so comically that even Miss Horton herself laughed as she caught sight of it. She looked on as he assisted the two girls to the saddle. Then the little cavalcade trotted swiftly down the drive.

“A manly young fellow!” was her verdict, as she turned away from the window. “A manly young fellow! Chick-a-dee is fortunate!”



“ THEN THE LITTLE CAVALCADE TROTTED SWIFTLY DOWN THE DRIVE.”

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CHAPTER XVI

A PROBLEM IN REDUCTION

SINCE the beginning of the term Abby Anderson had taken no part whatever in the Quartette's frolics. Grace had invited her to spend the previous summer with her, in Maine, and Belle had asked her to visit the Gray plantation, but she had refused both invitations. It was a decisive refusal, but not at all like the one which the "old" Abby would have given, before the loving, helpful interest of the girls had pierced her armor of foolish pride.

"I wish I could say yes," she had answered, with tears in her eyes, "but it is impossible. I expect to teach all summer, some classes in New York, which Miss Horton has secured for me."

The girls understood and refrained from pressing their point. Before November set in Abby's mother was forced to take to her bed, a hopeless, helpless invalid. In spite of the fact that there were others to do the home work, this settled for ever Abby's hope of college, and a professorship later. With money to feed and clothe the little ones, so badly needed, the delay which the college

course demanded was out of the question. In fact even Fairmount, with what she could earn by helping with the younger scholars, had to be given up. Abby decided to continue her Academy work until Christmas, using the time to find a regular teacher's position in the town, or in New York itself.

When the girls learned these details, they realized how bitter a disappointment it meant for their friend, and at once went into executive session, to devise ways and means of helping her to the cherished four years at Barnard. Four urgent letters were despatched to four fathers, letters which told the whole pitiful story, and asked for permission, backed by something more tangible, to help Abby in this crisis.

The answers were satisfactory, and the girls hurried to their friend to tell her that college was still not only possible, but an assured fact.

"But I can't accept!" Abby persisted stubbornly. "I can't! I can't! Please don't coax me."

"I don't see why, I'm sure!" Belle said hotly. "We have the money, more than we need, and we are so anxious to use it in this lovely way."

"But I cannot accept charity, for four years, too," Abby answered decisively. "If it were simply my college expenses, I could tutor my way through; but when you remember that five people

are dependent upon me —" she stopped with a hopeless gesture.

"What do you think father said about you in his letter?" Grace asked proudly. "He said that the good influence you have had on a certain harum-scarum Quartette could never be repaid by a trifle of expense money. Wasn't that fine? And father knew what he was talking about, too, because he studied you, Abby, the year before last, when he took us to and from Portland in the *Water Lily*. He said there were not many girls like you."

"It is very kind of him, very," Abby murmured in shy embarrassment. But, nevertheless, she persisted in her refusal to accept a regular income until she had finished her course, and could take a suitable position.

"You'll be sorry, Abby," Grace hinted darkly. "It means delay now, but you'd gain by it in the end. Now you'll have to teach 'two and two,' and 'c-a-t'! It's a shame, a real shame, so there!"

"I think I am right, Grace," Abby answered gravely. "I cannot bear to start my life with a load of debt on my shoulders. I have talked it all over with mother, and she agrees with me. I may be wrong, but I am doing what I think is right, and oh! I wish I could thank you! but I can't! I can't express it!"

So the matter was dropped, but Grace deter-

mined to make the coming Christmas vacation a memorable one to Abby, if she could possibly accomplish it.

Abby went on with her teacher's work faithfully, and studied harder than ever, making the most of the short period still left to her as a school-girl. The Quartette managed to coax her into number seventeen or twenty-four for an occasional chat over a gay little spread; but she had so little free time that these conferences became more and more rare as the holiday season drew near.

Not long before the midwinter vacation, Belle sought Abby out for one last conference on the subject of college. She made her plea in a masterly manner, bringing to bear upon the subject every argument that she could conceive, but all to no avail. As she left the class-room where she had cornered Abby, and mounted the stairs, she was in a humor far from tender. Believing, as she did, that Abby was throwing away her best good for a whim, she did not take this final refusal in the spirit in which it was made.

As she walked slowly along the corridor, lost in frowning thought, a queer little choking sound attracted her attention. She paused a moment, wondering if she had imagined it. No! There it was again, and from the room on her right, Lilian Edwards' room.

While she hesitated, uncertain what to do, the

sound came again, this time unmistakably a sob of grief, suppressed though it was. Belle knocked softly upon Lilian's door, but received no answer. A second knock, more resolute, produced a muffled: "Who is it? I'm busy."

"It's I, Lilian — Belle! Please let me in, honey."

"By and by, Belle, I — I —"

"No, now!" Belle demanded firmly. "I want to talk to you."

There was a moment's delay, during which Belle's quick ears caught the tell-tale rattle of china, and the splash of a hastily emptied pitcher. Then the door was partly opened, and Lilian presented a flushed face in the aperture.

"I — I'm busy, Belle. I'll see you some other time," she said, refusing to meet Belle's eyes. But her reddened lids and tear-swollen face told all too plainly the nature of her task.

Belle's heart was touched. Lilian crying! Why, they all thought she never cried. She always seemed so placid, and so indifferent to many things which would have deeply wounded other girls. Belle's own face flushed as she remembered several slights for which she herself had been responsible.

"I know what you've been busy about," she said gently, as she marched into the room and closed the door. "You've been crying, Lilian. I'm so sorry. Can't I help you?"

"No! no one can help me," Lilian answered dolefully.

"It isn't illness at home, is it?" was the anxious question.

"No, no one's ill. It — it's all right, Belle. I only —"

Her eyes filled again, and though she made an effort at self-control, her grief was too powerful. She threw herself down on the floor beside the bed, and sobbed as though her heart would break. In an instant Belle was on her knees beside her, her dark head close to Lilian's fair one. As she put her arm around her, and spoke coaxingly, there were tears in her own eyes.

"Tell me, honey, please do. I reckon I've been mean to you lots of times, and I'm ever so sorry."

No answer; only the great sobs went on.

"I do want to help you, Lilian," Belle persisted gently. "Please tell me what's the matter. It will do you good to talk it over, really it will."

"I — I don't want — to be — so fat!"

For an instant Belle had to press her lips tight to keep from laughing, the answer was so unexpected. Then she realized that, to Lilian, it was no laughing matter. Her grief was very real.

"But you won't —" she was beginning, when Lilian interrupted her.

"I know I eat things I shouldn't, and I know I don't exercise enough. I never used to mind

being fat, as long as I was comfortable, but lately I do. I care more and more every day! But I suppose it's too late now."

"What made you begin to feel this way about it?" Belle questioned curiously.

"The dance, the night of the Love Feast, you know. I had a nice time sitting out with some of the boys, but it wasn't the same as dancing, after all. Then Chopsy said —"

"Chopsy?"

"Yes, John Armstrong, you know. He used to be awfully fat too, but he's not now; he's just right, don't you think so?"

"I don't know," Belle answered truthfully. "I don't think I noticed."

"But you did it!" Lilian exclaimed, with a look of shocked rebuke upon her plump, fair face. The two girls were still crouched upon the floor, but Lilian's tears had stopped. She was still filled with troubled grief, however, as the sharp, sobbing breath testified.

"I?" Belle's amazement was too genuine to be assumed. "Why, I hardly ever see him."

"He says you did it, anyway. I remember now; you told him, or some one else and he overheard it, that you didn't like fat people. He said he began to train down from that very moment. If you had seen him the night of the dance! Why, he's a splendid figure, Belle, just splendid! He

asked me why I didn't go in training, too. I wish I could, but I suppose it's too late now?" she ended her sentence with wistful upward inflection.

"Too late! Not a bit of it," Belle declared emphatically. "Is your father fat?"

"No indeed!"

"Your mother?"

"No, none of my people are. Why, my mother is tall and slender, Belle, almost your build, but not so pretty, of course."

"Then I don't see any reason why you shouldn't be tall and slender, too!" Belle announced resolutely. "But it will mean work, Lilian, real hard work, and not for a few days, or a few weeks, or even a few months. You see what Chopsy did, but I'll warrant he kept right at it. Are you willing to do that?"

"Oh, Belle, I'm more than willing, I'm anxious. You said once," she hesitated, blushing, "that you thought I was pretty. Do you think so, Belle?"

"Indeed I do, Lilian! Your hair is a beautiful color, and there's so much of it. And your eyes are so blue. It's unusual to have dark lashes with your hair and eyes, too. But your complexion — not now, of course," Belle confessed, with a ripple of laughter, as she looked at the tear-swollen face, "but usually your complexion is just perfect. You'd be really handsome if —"

"Yes, if!" Lilian repeated angrily. "There won't be any 'if' by and by, I can tell you, if I can help it. I'm tired of being a 'fairy.'"

"But perhaps you'll be a real fairy, before we finish," Belle reminded her. "'Do you believe in fairies?'" she quoted, mimicking a childish voice. "I do! In this case, at least. Now let's set to work. Anything to eat in the room, Lilian?"

Lilian opened the top drawer of her big desk and displayed three fat cream-puffs, an apple tart, and a big box of chocolate cherries.

"Anything else?" Belle questioned severely.

Another drawer was pulled out, but it contained a comparatively modest assortment, — a box of cheese-wafers, and a bottle of sweet spiced pickles.

"Is this all?" came the inexorable demand.

"That's all!" Lilian answered. "Except some apples; I forgot those."

Belle placed the entire collection of edibles on the top of the desk and surveyed it disdainfully.

"No wonder!" she ejaculated finally. "No wonder!"

Her forehead puckered into a thoughtful frown, and for a moment not a word was spoken. Then she evidently arrived at a satisfactory conclusion, because a smile replaced the frown.

"Look here, Lilian, it's just as well to be perfectly frank, don't you think so? If we undertake this thing at all, we must go through with it, do

you understand? You mustn't be what Chopsy calls a 'quitter!' "

"I'll go through with it," Lilian answered, with grim determination expressed in every line of her plump countenance.

"And you must give up eating sweets, candies and cake, and pastry, altogether! Understand? Altogether!"

Lilian nodded her head emphatically.

"And you must not take a thing between meals, not one bite! We'll donate these for the Day Nursery party to-morrow, except the cream-puffs; they won't keep."

Another comprehending series of nods that would not have disgraced a Chinese mandarin.

"And even at the table you must eat very sparingly. They say we all ought to leave the table with the feeling that we could eat more. I reckon you don't have that feeling very often! This will cut out desserts, you know, unless they are fruit. And that's not all," she went on, warming to her task, as its possibilities appealed to her mind.

"Not all?" Lilian's face expressed horrified amazement. With sweets and pastry, between-meal "bites" and meal-time desserts on the black list, what more was there to sacrifice? Was she to starve?

"No, indeed, not nearly all!" Belle declared positively.

"But I don't see what else I can do without," she faltered. "Shall I give up meat, and —"

"Oh! I'm not referring to your diet now. The best rule for that is to give up what you are particularly fond of, then you are pretty sure to strike it right. It's a good general rule, anyway. But there's something much more important than food, and that's exercise!"

Lilian groaned involuntarily, even though she knew what was coming.

"You must take a —"

"Oh, Belle, no! I'm so afraid of horses. When they turn their heads around that way, I always feel sure they are going to kick, or run away, or do something dreadful."

"I wasn't going to say ride, but walk. You must take a walk, a good long one, every day. And you mustn't dawdle along, either; that kind of a walk won't do you any good at all. You'll have to work harder in the gym, too!"

"All right, I will!" Lilian answered. "Let's begin right away. Will you go to walk now, Belle? Please do!"

Belle hesitated. She had planned a special trip with the rest of the Quartette, for that afternoon, to visit old Minerva, the fruit-seller. The poor, old, colored woman was down with "ru-mantics," as she called it, and the girls went over frequently, to carry dainties of one sort

or another, and cheer her up. But Belle herself was not a "quitter!" She had deliberately started the machinery of this "reduction" engine, and she had no intention of taking her hand from the throttle until she had pulled safely into the station.

"All right, Lilian," she answered, resolutely stifling her regret.

Of course Lilian's strenuous life from then on could not escape the keen eyes of the school. When she refused dessert that first evening at dinner, and left a special dainty untouched, the girls exchanged wondering glances. The next day, when, for the third time, Lilian kept to the letter of her agreement, and left the table feeling, not that she could eat a little more, but that she could eat a great deal more, they began to tease her about it. Here, however, her imperturbable good nature came to her aid, and they soon grew tired of it.

As days went by, even Belle was surprised at Lilian's determined persistence in the training-down process. The walks continued, with great regularity, and no pupil among the seniors worked more faithfully in the physical culture class than the Fairy. Once or twice at the table, when some specially beloved delicacy appeared, Lilian would look questioningly at her mentor. But Belle was inexorable. An almost imperceptible shake of the dark head would settle the matter.

On the first Sunday after the experiment began, Lilian met what almost proved to be her Waterloo. Yet the enemy seemed so insignificant, after all — just pretty, long-stemmed glasses, filled with a dark mixture, and covered with rich, whipped cream; the whole combination ordinarily called “fudge pudding.”

Lilian pushed her glass away, then drew it towards her, hesitated, picked up her spoon and put it down again, and looked appealingly at Belle. Fudge pudding! How she loved to come upon the crisp nuts, on the soft bits of fig and raisin! And how delicious its creamy blanket looked! She tried again to attract Belle’s attention, but again failed. Then she deliberately tore a leaf from the pretty little silver memorandum book which, with its accompanying pencil, dangled daintily from her chatelaine, and scribbled a message. She handed it to the waitress with the low-toned direction: “Give this to Miss Gray, please.”

Belle started in surprise when the maid placed the note before her. She had forgotten all about the Fairy, and was deep in an animated discussion of Christmas holiday plans. As she read it, she smiled involuntarily.

“How about fudge pudding? I’m not sure I care for it so very much.”

She started to write the reply: “Don’t touch

it!" but hesitated, remembering how very faithfully Lilian had stuck to the prescribed rules all the week. In the end she answered: "Sunday dinner dessert excepted!" and Lilian soon gave her ocular demonstration that Sunday dinner dessert was accepted, also.

At the end of the first ten days, the two were returning from a brisk "constitutional." Belle looked as fresh as when she started, but Lilian was somewhat drooping, and dragged along a few paces behind. Just outside the gates they met Doctor Harmsworth. He brought his motor to a standstill, and Belle hurried over to speak to him. Lilian, however, marched stolidly on. Doctor Harmsworth, charming as he was, could not vie just then, with the superior attractiveness of a chair, or a couch, or a resting-place of any sort.

"Is Miss Edwards sick?" the doctor questioned. "She did not seem like herself."

"Oh, no! she's not sick, just tired, that's all! We walked almost five miles to-day!"

"Five miles! Miss Edwards?"

"Yes. She's training down, you know."

"And you too?" he laughed.

"Oh! I'm the trainer!"

"Go slowly, please!" he cautioned her. "Not too strenuous! Remember, she's been lolling about all these years while you were exercising. How did you happen to start this thing, pray?"

“ Oh, I don't know,” Belle answered lightly.

“ It's a problem, and I like problems! ”

“ A problem? ” he asked curiously. “ How do you make that out? ”

“ I'm reducing Lilian to her lowest terms! ”

The people who met the doctor's motor, during the next ten minutes, wondered because he was smiling with intense enjoyment, all to himself.

CHAPTER XVII

OFF FOR NEW YORK

THE last week before the midwinter holidays barely dragged itself along. Calendars were anxiously consulted and marked off, but still the days seemed over deliberate in their passage. Every one was going somewhere, and was eager to get away, and every one anticipated a "perfectly lovely" time. Every one would be equally glad to return, when the vacation was over; but that thought never occurred to them.

On the day school closed, the rooms and corridors fairly hummed like a hive of bees. Packing had been going on, with more or less zeal, for several days. Grace had begun hers a week before. Unlike most girls it was a labor of love to her. Each gown was carefully folded, each sleeve and collar filled with soft white tissue paper, and, if an evening-dress, the whole placed in a white cheese-cloth folder, while slippers and boots were wrapped and marked. Grace was nothing if not methodical.

"If everything else fails," Belle said admiringly, "you can be a professional packer."

"Thank you," Grace answered shortly, "but I don't think everything else will fail."

"Neither do I, honey," was the laughing response. "Still, it's well to have something to fall back on, don't you think so?"

As she spoke she was rolling a soft wadded silk dressing-jacket into as tight a roll as she could compass. When this was accomplished she proceeded to push it by main force into a narrow space between a pair of tan walking-boots and her new skates. She was just beginning her deadly work upon a cream-colored crêpe gown when Grace caught sight of what she was doing, and forcibly restrained her.

"Oh, don't, please!" she begged, in horror-stricken tones. "Why, Belle, that's dreadful!"

"I can't help it," Belle defended herself. "I never could pack properly. Mammy always does it for me at home."

"I think it's a girl's duty to be just as dainty about her clothes as she can be," Grace began severely, surveying the packed tray with genuine dismay. "Honestly, Belle, a ten-year-old could do better than this. I know Chick-a-dee could. I don't understand it, either; you are so careless in things of this sort, yet you never look in the least untidy."

"For which, oh, be joyful!" Belle commented with exasperating lightness, as her friend hurriedly

removed the contents of the tray, smoothing the dresses tenderly.

“Lay out everything you want to take, and go away,” Grace issued her orders; “you bother me.”

Belle complied with cheerful alacrity, then sauntered out into the corridor singing a tantalizing nonsense rhyme, improvised on the spur of the moment.

“Miles Standish always said, ‘Do it yourself,
If you want to succeed in life’s race!’
But I don’t agree with him, not a bit;
For I say: ‘Leave it to Grace!’”

“Be funny! Do!” the subject of this complimentary “pome” called after her.

The give and take of their friendship were so evenly divided that neither could feel the least superiority over the other. Their very dissimilarity only served to knit their friendship closer.

The Quartette and Abby were to spend the holidays at the Archers’ New York home. The arrangement had been made soon after school opened for the fall term, for the Quartette, at least. As for Abby, only persistent pleading from them all had finally induced her to join in the holiday jaunt. Not that she did not long to go; she was a real girl after all, even though the burden upon her young shoulders made her seem older than the others. In reality she was only a year and a half

their senior, and three weeks in New York, at the gayest season of the year, appealed to her mightily.

By nine sharp, the following morning, the five girls and Tinker were on the station platform, with trunks checked, waiting for the train which was posted twenty minutes late, owing to the severe snowstorm farther north, the day before. Tinker, much to his disgust, had been enveloped in a scarlet and blue sweater of the canine variety. It was really quite becoming to his style of beauty, but he resented it deeply. As he followed the girls in their impatient march up and down the platform, his drooping attitude said, as plainly as words could have done: "This isn't my fault; it's my misfortune!"

When the train pulled in, much to the surprise of all, even of Grace herself, the *Wyonegomic*, Mr. Archer's private car, was on, and that gentleman himself was smiling a welcome from the wide, brass-railed platform in the rear. If his Wall Street associates could have seen him just at that moment, they surely would have become converts to the "dual personality" theory. For Mr. Archer suddenly became a jolly, big boy, joking and laughing in the midst of the gay group of girls, a big boy who bore no resemblance whatever to the austere financier whose every move made history in the money market.

"Isn't this fortunate!" he exclaimed in mock surprise. "To think that I should happen to be here just in time to take you down with me. Such a coincidence!"

Grace laughed significantly.

"Of course you didn't know, two weeks ago, that we had decided upon this particular train, did you, Daddy? Of course not! Father never plans nice things, girls; they just happen."

Mr. Archer met this accusation with a rollicking laugh of purest enjoyment.

"I'll acknowledge the truth of the allegation, and I'll kiss the allegator!" he declared, suiting the action to the words. "And the allegator's friends, too!" he added mischievously. "But, seriously, girls, you must regard this meeting as an accident: it will never do to establish a precedent, no, never! Five girls on the *Water Lily*; five girls on the *Wyonegomic*! Never do, will it, Tinker? Is this Tinker, by the way, or just an animated sweater?"

By this time they were all comfortably settled in the handsome car, and the train was steaming swiftly towards New York, the enchanted land of Christmas cheer, for them, at least. Beth at once removed the objectionable covering, and Tinker was himself again.

"I wish we were going a thousand miles," Belle sighed ecstatically, after a tour of inspection over

the car. "I never saw anything more complete in my life. That kitchen — excuse me, buffet — is a perfect love of a place. Even I would enjoy cooking in that!"

This was a genuine concession, as Belle's efforts in the culinary line had begun and ended in three spreads, soon after she received her chafing-dish. The first, an unsuccessful attempt at fudge-making, was followed by one which Chick-a-dee and the small girls thoroughly enjoyed. The third attempt was a really remarkable affair, "just to show what I can do, when I put my mind to it!" as Belle expressed it. Only the Quartette attended this last "cook-fest," but they had fared sumptuously upon creamed scallops, and a "rabbit," all the work of Belle's hands unaided.

"After that, I retired on my laurels," she told Mr. Archer. "My chafing-dish, since then, has become a peripatetic one! There's only one rule about it; she who borrows, scours!"

"I am glad you like my car," Mr. Archer said, smiling with pleased satisfaction at her praise, which had been warmly echoed by the others. "It was built from my own design, and I flatter myself it is pretty nearly perfect. It's a third attempt, and the third time's the charm, you know. If everything goes well, and your parents can spare you, I'll take you all for a trip in it next summer, to the coast or to Yellowstone Park.

Or we could switch off on to some spur leading up into the mountains, and camp out, using the *Wyonegomic* for head-quarters."

Mr. Archer spoke as though he were inviting them to ride to the Battery or to Central Park. The girls were speechless; such a pleasing prospect took their breath away.

"We might invite Hal, and one or two of his friends," Mr. Archer went on, thoroughly interested in his plan; "And Mousie, of course. How about it, girls?"

But for once in their lives, the girls were at a loss for words. Finally Mary whispered solemnly: "From now on I'll be like Chick-a-dee; I'll live in the future!"

"You won't forget your promise, father, will you?" Grace pleaded earnestly. "Because it would be dreadful if we thought of it all those months, and then were disappointed after all. And you are so busy sometimes."

"I'll appoint you chairman of the jogging committee, Gracie, with the other girls as assistants. You may jog my memory as often as you please, girlie. But I won't forget; I expect to enjoy it as much as the rest of you. Besides, I really have business out west about that time. Well, here we are! I telegraphed for the large car, so we can all go home together. Welcome to our city, young ladies! I'd present you with the key, only, un-

fortunately, the mayor forgot to send it around. I want you to enjoy your three weeks thoroughly. Command me in any way," he added gallantly.

Mrs. Archer was at a committee meeting when they reached the house, but Miss Munsing, lovingly called "Mousie" by all the girls, received them and made them comfortable. They almost smothered the little woman with their hugs and kisses. She had to beg for mercy.

"That's what you get for taking charge of us at Heart's Ease," Belle told her. "You were a most successful chaperon."

"An ideal one, Mousie," Mary added. "And that summer in Maine was an ideal vacation. I don't know when I ever enjoyed myself more. My trip last summer was fine, but it couldn't compare with that."

"Mother is in such demand," Grace explained apologetically. "She's on so many boards and committees, I wonder how she ever manages to keep them straight. She has a splendid secretary, though, a graduate of Vassar. You see, mother has great executive ability. That's what the paper called it, when they described the play she gave at the Plaza, not long ago. She cleared ever so much money for the Working Girls' Hotel. Father said he'd rather give the money and keep mother. We don't see very much of her, father and I."

All unknown to Grace, there was an undercur-

rent of wistfulness in the words, loyal as they were, which made Mousie put her arm around the girl and hug her lovingly. With all the wealth and luxury about her, Grace lacked the one thing she craved most, mothering! The "Lady," Beth's new mother, realized this lack, and showed the greatest tenderness towards her. But the Carters had been abroad for some time, and Grace missed the "Lady," as the girls still called her, as much as Beth did. Frequent letters, long, chatty ones, bearing foreign postmarks, proved that she was not forgotten.

Mrs. Archer hurried in just in time for luncheon, of which she partook without removing her hat. She greeted the girls kindly, and inquired into their plans for the holidays.

"Go wherever you please, chaperoned of course, if it is necessary. Mousie will take care of you, and I have also arranged with my secretary, and with Elise, my maid, to act as escorts if needed. I want you all to have a good time, but don't make any engagements for Christmas day. Keep that free for the dinner and the tree. I've refused a score of invitations for that day, myself; Mr. Archer insists on a home dinner, one of the old-fashioned turkey and oysters and mince pie variety."

"By the way," she added briskly, "I was urged to-day, at the directors' meeting, to get up something in aid of the Home for Blind Babies."

"Blind babies!" Beth exclaimed involuntarily, flushing at her unusual temerity. "Oh! how pitiful!"

"I wish we could help them in some way," Mary said earnestly.

The philanthropic work which the girls were carrying on in their "Rosebud" society, at Fairmount, had done them all good by making them more open to appeals of this sort.

Mrs. Archer nodded her handsome head approvingly. She was a stately woman, elaborately gowned and coiffured. Too elaborately, Mary thought, but checked the thought sharply as she realized that she was criticizing her hostess. The Archers' position in society had given the lady an assurance that made her dictatorial, even overbearing, at times. Her husband frankly declared that she had too many irons in the fire! As she could not do justice to them all, the iron for smoothing the family life was often neglected.

She meant well, yet, in spite of her kindness to them, the girls could not feel towards her as they did towards the "Lady." Grace herself felt the difference, although she never acknowledged it, even to her own heart; she was too loyal for that.

"I understand that the Fairmount Dramatic Club gave quite a successful play, some time ago," Mrs. Archer continued thoughtfully. "I remem-

ber that Colonel Arnold was wildly enthusiastic over it, and he only saw the dress rehearsal."

"You mean the 'Croquette,'" Grace said laughingly. "We gave that the Hallowe'en before last, at the Love Feast."

"You all took part, didn't you? Have you forgotten it?"

"No, indeed!" Belle answered emphatically. "Mary drilled us in that play most unmercifully. She was author, stage manager, and hero, all in one. The words of my part are engraven on my heart!"

Belle spoke with such dramatic fervor that they all laughed. Mrs. Archer nodded her head in a pleased fashion.

"Good!" she said. "Why shouldn't we give that play here, as a benefit? Are you willing, girls?"

Her suggestion was received with dismayed silence. A play, before a New York audience, for money! Belle was the first to speak.

"Of course we are willing, Mrs. Archer. We'll be delighted to do it, if it will help you, won't we?"

"But two of the girls who took part are not here, mamma," Grace objected.

"Did they have important parts?"

"Oh, no! Some of the girls in the neighborhood could take them, I suppose. Cora Allyn would do for one, and Janet Arkwright, if she's home."

"Yes, Janet is home," Mrs. Archer answered. "The family returned last week. I met Mrs. Arkwright at the meeting this morning, and invited Janet to dine with us on Christmas. If we undertake this thing at all, girls, it must be done well. I cannot lend my name to a poor performance. Don't look so solemn!" she ended laughingly. "Of course it will be done well. I felt sure of that before I proposed it."

"I should think it would be dreadful to give it before the public," Beth murmured in awestruck tones. "And for real money, too!"

"If you feel that way about it," Mrs. Archer was beginning, when Belle enlightened her.

"Beth isn't in it! She couldn't say 'boo' to a goose, could you, honey?"

"Boo!" Beth retorted unexpectedly, raising a laugh at Belle's expense.

"How much will you ask for the tickets, Mrs. Archer?" Mary inquired in anxious tones. "Fifty cents?"

Mrs. Archer's fork dropped with a clatter as the lady burst into a hearty laugh.

"Fifty cents! You dear little innocent! I shall ask five dollars, and limit the sale, too. The public, my public, will be only too anxious to pay it. You will have to excuse me now, my dears. I am due at a directors' meeting at three, and a tea later. Grace asked me not to accept any invitations for

you. She seemed to think that you would rather arrange your own good times. As you are only school-girls I believe that is the wisest plan. Time enough for society, later. It's a grind enough when it does come. Good-by! I'll see you at dinner."

She swept away to renew the "grind," after a hurried peck at her daughter's upturned face. Grace watched her admiringly, noting the haughty carriage, and the graceful sweep of the long gown. The others breathed a little more freely after the lady's departure. They found her dominating personality oppressive. She was patronizing, too, and girls dislike that intensely. Yet not for worlds would they have confessed their relief even to themselves.

"We'll have to rush," Grace announced, a moment later, snapping her watch case with a click. "To-day's the day I set for the Hippodrome. I thought we'd be too tired to shop. We'll be a little late, but it can't be helped. I'll tell Evans to go as fast as he can without being held up. Let's stop for some chocolates on the way. We won't need Mousie. She hates the Hippodrome, but I think it is beautiful. There's a tremendous tank, Abby, and the actors go right into it and disappear! The circus part is usually fine, too."

They rose from the table and started for their rooms, but Grace detained them.

"Look here, girls, let's have it understood, right from the start, that we are all to be perfectly independent. If any one doesn't care for anything that is planned, just say so, and shop, or rest, or do whatever you please. I'm beginning with the Hippodrome so as to work up to a climax — Grand Opera! Is it a bargain? "

"It is!" was the solemn response, and Abby immediately proved its sincerity as far as she was concerned, by begging to be excused from the afternoon's amusement.

"I'd rather trot around the Park, Grace, if you don't mind. I've always longed to explore it. The trees must be beautiful in winter. My bump of direction is splendidly developed, so don't worry about me. I'll be home before dark."

"Will you take Miss — " Grace began, but Abby finished for her.

"I'll take Miss Abby Anderson, and I'll take care of her, too. Good-by! Have a good time."

"Where's your brother, Grace?" Belle inquired casually, on the way to the Hippodrome. She had never met Hal Archer, but Grace's enthusiastic descriptions of this only brother — his good looks, his manliness, his love of fun — had been tantalizing to Belle, who frankly acknowledged her liking for boys. In her own home, Belle reigned a queen over several older brothers, an imperious,

unreasonable sovereign at times, but always a devoted one.

"Hal is at his shack over on Long Island," Grace answered. "He and several other Princeton men are living the 'simple life,' hunting, I believe. That's what they call it, at least. Hal raves over the charm of the winter woods. They must be cramming a bit, too, because they have one of the post-graduates with them as tutor. I wanted him to bring his party here, for Christmas week, at least, but mamma said no. She said we are not society girls and it would be too strenuous for her."

"I'm so glad they are not coming," Beth declared in relieved tones. "I — I mean — oh! you know, Grace! We can have so much more fun by ourselves."

"Of course we can," Mary agreed heartily, but Belle refused to commit herself.

CHAPTER XVIII

ABBY'S ADVENTURE

IN spite of the fact that Abby, the dependable, had confidently assured Grace that she would be at home before dark, the Hippodrome party returned, and were gathered about the tea-table in the library, and still no Abby.

"If it were any one else I'd be genuinely worried," Grace said, after several trips to the window to peer anxiously through the early darkness of a December night. But neither up nor down the avenue, nor across on the Park side did she discover any trace of the absentee. "Abby's reliable, I know, but I do wish she'd come."

Even this well known "reliability" of Abby's did not keep Grace from growing more and more anxious, as time passed. Finally she decided to dispatch one of the footmen in search of the missing member of the party, although the quest seemed a veritable "needle in the haystack" one. Just as she was giving the man directions, the butler announced that Miss Archer was wanted at the telephone. Grace flew into the hall, and, to

her great relief, found Abby herself on the wire.

"I'm so sorry, Grace," Abby began apologetically. "I do hope you haven't worried about me. I didn't know how late it is until a few moments ago. Is your mother home yet?" The last question was put in anxious tones; Abby stood in awe of the lady of the house.

"No, mother hasn't come yet," Grace reassured her. "Where are you, Abby? I was just sending out a searching party."

"I'm sorry, Grace. I'm next door."

"Next door?"

"Yes, in Mme. Archambeau's. I met with an accident, just a little one, and was detained. I'm all right now. I'll tell you about it: I'm coming right in. Good-by!"

"I hope you'll hurry, or I'll die of curiosity. Good-by!" Grace rushed back to the library with the excited explanation. "She says she's met with an accident, girls. She's next door, with Mme. Archambeau."

"Who's Mme. Archambeau?" the others demanded in chorus.

"Oh! she's a very, very old lady. She's been our next-door neighbor ever since I can remember. She's quite wealthy, but she hasn't a relative in the world. Isn't it dreadful? She has a host of friends, though, in spite of being such a peppery,

outspoken little body. She doesn't care for girls; she says they chatter."

"Then Abby will suit her perfectly," Beth said decisively.

"Indeed she will," Belle agreed smilingly. "You have to actually pry talk out of Abby. I told that to one of my brothers, and he immediately declared that he wanted to meet her because she must be such a refreshing novelty!" Belle ended with a queer little pout, fully aware that no one ever had to pry speech from her.

"Mme. Archambeau is the daintiest little lady you ever saw," Grace went on enthusiastically. "She has pure white curls, not gray, but silvery white, and such a slender, erect figure. She dresses in soft, trailing gowns, and wears beautiful old laces. She was a famous belle in Paris, years ago, although she's an American by birth. She doesn't approve of New York society: she says it's crude! Her only companion now is Tiddle-de-Winks."

"Tiddle-de-Winks! The game, do you mean?"

"No! It's the name of her big Persian cat. He has a handsome Oriental rug all his own, but he never steps on it. When he wants to lie down, he stands at the edge of it, and hops into the middle. That's how she came to name him. Funny, isn't it? He's perfectly enormous, and his eyes shine like jewels. Honestly, I'd hate to meet him in the dark, he looks so dangerous."

Abby hurried in at that moment, apologizing humbly for her delay. The girls crowded about her, impatient to hear what had happened, but she drew back suddenly, with a sharp exclamation of pain. Then, for the first time, they noticed the bandaged hand.

"Why, Abby! What is the matter?" Grace asked in distress. "Sit down, dear, and let me help you. There!"

She gently removed Abby's hat and coat, then piled several pillows on one end of the great couch, and forcibly placed her in their midst.

"Now lean back and be 'comfy,' " she ordered, "and tell us all about it. All right now?"

Abby nodded.

"Is your hand badly hurt?" Grace questioned anxiously.

"Oh no! it isn't much," Abby began modestly, "but I've had a real adventure, and I've met the sweetest little lady you ever saw."

The girls stared at the speaker in surprise. Was this Abby Anderson? Abby the quiet, the self-contained?

"It seems as though I always miss things," Belle sighed in aggrieved tones. "Here's even Abby having an adventure!" "Even Abby" smiled, as she continued her story.

"I wandered all over the Park this afternoon, and enjoyed it so much. Isn't it beautiful, Grace?"

"Is it?" Grace asked with the indifference of familiarity. "I suppose it is. Do go on!"

"Why, Grace, those beautiful bushes with the ice on them, and the wide drives with those magnificent trees meeting overhead —"

"I always skip that part," Belle interrupted plaintively, "when I'm anxious to reach the adventure."

"All right," Abby took the hint laughingly, "so will I, but I certainly enjoyed it. I went into the lion house, and while I was watching the keepers feed the animals, I saw one of the attendants take a buckshot gun away from some small boys. They persisted that they were not going to use it, but he was afraid to trust them. He explained to me, afterwards, that the shot are very painful, even if not actually dangerous.

"'Kids will be kids, miss,' he laughed. 'I have eight of me own at home, so I know a little about 'em!' He promised to return the gun when the boys were ready to leave the Park, so they had to give in, although you could see that they objected mightily.

"I forgot all about the incident afterwards, until just at dusk, as I was almost at the gate nearest here, I caught sight of those same boys with their heads close together, talking excitedly. One of them had the gun raised, and was taking aim at some object. I remembered what the good-

natured father of the double quartette had said about the buckshot causing such pain, so I hurried forward to stop them before they could shoot.

“ Look out, lady!” one of the boys screamed, as soon as he caught sight of me. “ It’s a wild-cat! It’ll jump on you an’ claw you to pieces! There it is, in those bushes.”

“ I looked, and saw two gleaming eyes, and a dark furry body crouched beneath the overhanging boughs of the nearest bush. I was really frightened, because the attendant had been telling me about one of the animals, a lynx, I believe, that had escaped, and had never been recaptured. I started to run, but stopped to beg the boys not to shoot the poor thing. I urged them to tell one of the Park police, so that it could be captured unharmed, but the boys were set upon using their horrid old gun.

“ While I was talking to them I happened to glance at the bushes again, and this time I saw the animal plainly. It was standing up and I distinctly saw a collar, with a big white bow of ribbon, around its neck, so I knew it must be some one’s pet cat. The boy with the gun had just taken aim when I rushed to him to knock his arm up, but he was too quick for me, and I caught the charge in my hand.”

“ Oh!” the girls exclaimed in distress.

“ That’s just what I said,” Abby went on,

with a rueful smile. "I felt as though red-hot needles were being pushed into my flesh. I had no glove on, for I had been hunting in my purse for a dime to buy the boys off, so it hurt worse than it would have done otherwise. The pain was so great that I sank down on the ground actually moaning.

"The poor youngsters were dreadfully frightened. They danced about frantically, urging each other to go for the doctor, and the ambulance, and the police, but no one heeding the others. One of them finally decided to summon the fire department. I failed to see the connection, myself, but the boy seemed bent upon doing something to help.

"After the first shock of pain was over, I went up to the bushes, and poor pussy crept into my arms, shivering with fear. It was pitiful to see how he clung to me. I carried him close to the lamp-post, and read the name and address on his collar."

"I know what it said," interrupted Grace: "'Tiddle-de-Winks, care Archambeau, Fifth Avenue, New York!' She has those collars especially made, and keeps a whole drawer full of beautiful ribbon for bows."

"That's right," Abby nodded. "She showed them to me. I tried to induce the boys to carry the cat home, but Mr. Puss was evidently not of a

forgiving disposition, because he put up his back and spit and clawed at them whenever they tried to take him; so it ended by my taking him over myself. I thought, at the time, that he must weigh a hundred pounds, at least. My hand was paining dreadfully, and he really is heavy."

"What did Mme. Archambeau say?" Grace questioned eagerly.

"She telephoned for her doctor before I had even finished my explanation. She's a fragile little lady, but isn't she decided, though?"

"She certainly is!" Grace made a comical face at some remembrance. "Hal and I know that, or I do, anyway. When we were little we had chances enough to note the decision of which you speak, Abby. Dainty billet-doux from next door were of frequent occurrence. They were always delightfully formal, and frightfully to the point. 'Mrs. Archambeau requests that Miss Grace refrain from pointing her beanshooter in the direction of her premises.' 'Mrs. Archambeau regrets to trouble Mrs. Archer, but wishes to inform that lady that Miss Grace has seriously annoyed a member of her family.'"

"A member of her family? Why, Grace!" Beth's tone was shocked.

"She meant Tiddle-de-Winks!" Grace explained, with a laugh.

"Really?"

"Yes, really! I must confess that there was generally some cause for the complaints, only she always blamed me for everything. I told her once that Hal had been the guilty one, but she only said: 'Well, you ought to try to exert a better influence upon him.' And Hal is several years older than I am! But then, she adores him. The time we 'seriously annoyed a member of her family' was when we put sticky taffy in five pieces of paper, and I talked to the footman who was exercising Tiddle-de, while Hal stuck one on each paw, and one on his tail, and then shoo-ed him into the house. If ever any one saw feline disdain that was the time, because he's a fastidious creature, a really cultured cat! Go on, Abby!"

"The doctor dug out the shot." Abby winced as she spoke. "There were only five or six. He said that boys usually put in ever so many more, but they were probably at the end of their supply, which was fortunate for me. It was also fortunate that my hand suffered instead of my face. As soon as it was bandaged, Mme. Archambeau made me lie down, and gave me some sort of a tonic to drink. I don't know what it was. I fell asleep afterwards. I was so ashamed of myself! You know I never sleep in the daytime. I told her that, but she only smiled in such a queer way. She wants me to go in to-morrow morning and read to her.

I'd love to go while you girls are shopping, if you don't mind, Grace."

"Certainly I don't," Grace assured her heartily. "We are to be free and independent during this visit: that was agreed upon beforehand, remember. I'm so glad you have met her, Abby, because in spite of what I told you about those notes, she's a lovely character. Once when Hal was a little fellow, almost a baby, he was very ill. Mother was at Palm Beach, and the trained nurse left without warning, but Mme. Archambeau came in and took charge of the nursery. She sat up with him for three nights, until father found another nurse. The doctor said that she saved his life. Hal worships her, even though he does tease her. You ought to see him pick her up in his arms and carry her down-stairs when she's weak, or lame. She spoils him dreadfully, I think, but Hal says you can't spoil a bad egg!"

Abby spent the following morning with the little lady next door. Mme. Archambeau had so many treasures to show her, and to Abby it was all so interesting, that the time fairly flew by. One o'clock came and they were not nearly through with their talk. Finding that the Quartette were going to the theatre in the afternoon, and that Abby really cared nothing about it, the lady telephoned to Grace, and asked if she would lend her her friend for the rest of the day.

"Certainly, Mme. Archambeau," Grace replied, adding mischievously: "but I'm so surprised. I didn't know you cared for girls, because they talk so much."

Not to be outdone the old lady retorted promptly: "Abby talks a good deal, but she says something each time, I notice!" and Grace heard a satisfied little chuckle as she hung up the receiver.

And Abby did talk freely to this imperious little dame. She was a beauty lover, and all her life she had hungered for beautiful things; yet the magnificence of the Archer home did not appeal to her as did the quiet elegance of the house next door. The old lady had surrounded herself with fine pictures, rare books, and objects of art gathered in her many trips abroad. Numerous as these were, each had been chosen carefully, with a view to the harmonious whole.

The old lady described her travels to Abby, and spoke of the returning "wander-lust," which even old age failed to subdue. She also explained to her young visitor something of the charities with which she was connected, and found in Abby an interested listener.

After luncheon was over, the carriage was ordered, for Mme. Archambeau was old-fashioned and refused to follow the popular fancy for automobiles. Her horses were her friends; no inani-

mate machine for her! Abby noticed the almost reverent care with which the footman assisted his mistress to her seat, and tucked the handsome robes about her, shutting the door afterwards as noiselessly as possible. The old lady nodded towards him, as the man took his place on the box.

“What do you think of him?” she asked. “Well-trained, eh? Well, seven years ago he was a Bowery ‘tough,’ a hard drinker and gambler, cursing and rioting. He had lost his position through no fault of his own, and his failure to find another one made him bitter; so he went from bad to worse, each downward step hardening him more and more. When I found him, and took him to the Bowery Mission, he was pretty nearly hopeless, even from the Mission point of view, which is a very liberal one. Now I depend upon him absolutely,” she ended proudly.

Their drive took them to this same Bowery Mission, where Mme. Archambeau left some new books and magazines, and made some final arrangements for the Christmas treat which she had promised to provide. Both the Mission and the workers were revelations to Abby. All her life she had been hampered for money, and every dollar had to be stretched to do the work of two or three. Until Grace befriended her by fairly pulling her into her own gay circle, Abby’s pleasures were few

and far between, and she was fast becoming hard and disagreeable. But Grace, in her loving, tactful way, had changed all that by giving her a glimpse, at least, into the brighter side of life; and now this new friend, with her abundant means, and her heart overflowing with good works, was opening up to her a new world.

On their way home from the Mission, the carriage stopped before a fashionable furrier's, where Mme. Archambeau chose a beautiful set of mink, a muff and collar, which she presented to Abby.

"Tiddle-de-Winks wishes to show his gratitude to his preserver," she insisted, when Abby hesitated to accept so valuable a gift. "He purred to me this morning that he thought you'd like a set of furs for Christmas. It seemed very appropriate to me; you saved his own fur for him, you know." She enjoyed her quaint little conceit so thoroughly that Abby would have found it hard to spoil her pleasure, even if that wonderful insight, which is the gift of great-hearted people, especially of those living much alone, had not led the old lady to choose the one thing the young girl genuinely longed to possess.

Abby enjoyed pretty clothes, but never coveted them. In dress her taste was very quiet. The gay attire of the Quartette, their dainty accessories of gloves, ribbons and laces, never disturbed her

in the least, but she had more than once wished she could buy a set of furs. As they left the store, she happened to glance into one of the long mirrors, and started in surprise. Was that tall, imposing-looking creature in the handsome furs, really she herself? Unconsciously she carried her head a trifle higher, and smiled frequently on the homeward drive.

That night she presented herself to her friends somewhat shamefacedly, divided between pride in her gift, and doubt as to how they would consider her acceptance of it. But her doubt vanished as they examined the furs, and "oh-ed" and "ah-ed" over their beauty and richness.

"I never realized that you were so splendid-looking, Abby," Belle informed her frankly. "You began to blossom out up at Heart's Ease that summer, didn't she, Grace? And you've kept it up ever since."

"And to think of the lovely way in which you got the furs!" Beth remarked softly. "No wonder you are proud of them."

After that Abby's last doubt vanished, and she gave herself up to unalloyed enjoyment of the welcome addition to her wardrobe.

Mr. Archer came in while the girls were examining and trying on the furs. He joined the chorus of admiration so heartily, that Abby blushed with pleasure.

"You have won a friend worth having," he said to her quietly, later on. "Mme. Archambeau is a woman in a thousand."

"I know it," Abby answered earnestly. "I am so glad that she likes me. It is on Tiddle-de-Winks' account, of course. She's devoted to that cat."

"Of course, it's entirely due to that," he said teasingly. "Did you rescue a cat for each of the Quartette? They too seem wonderfully fond of you."

"And I'm so different from them," she replied, in all seriousness. "I don't understand why they always include me as they do, but I appreciate it, oh! more than I can express."

"I understand why they want you," he said quietly. "My only regret in regard to this," he hesitated an instant, "this friendship between you and Mme. Archambeau is that it will deprive my daughter and her friends of a very good influence. There! there!" he stopped abruptly, "I'm talking too much! Only remember, my child, that my little neighbor next door is true, true gold! And so are you," he added to himself, as he turned away.

Abby was almost indignant. Did Mr. Archer think for one minute that a new friend, however kindly, could change her feelings towards Grace? If so, he did not understand the depth

of her devotion to her first girl friend. Much mystified she went over and over his words without arriving at any solution of the riddle, then very sensibly resolved to let the matter rest.

CHAPTER XIX

AN UNPLEASANT PREDICAMENT

"COME in, come in, whoever you are!" Mary chanted gaily, in answer to a light tap upon her door the next morning.

Instead of accepting this general invitation, the applicant for admission simply pushed the door ajar and put her head in at the opening. Then she stood there, regarding Mary silently.

"Gracious! what is the matter?" Mary asked in startled tones, for one side of Grace's face was almost twice its natural size. "So that's why you were not down to breakfast! Oh! I beg pardon. I thought I was addressing my friend, Miss Grace Archer, but I see now that it is Mrs. Fat Lady from Barnum's circus. I was not aware that I was visiting the winter quarters of the freaks."

"I suppose it is funny," Grace answered dolefully; "it depends on the point of view, though, or else I am sadly lacking in humor."

"Please forgive me, Gracie." Mary was genuinely sorry for her little jest. "Please do. And it isn't funny in the least; it's a positive calamity. What caused it? Do you know?"

"Yes, I do!" Grace answered grimly. "It's a plain case of revenge. One of my teeth has been troubling me lately, but I kept quiet about it, hoping to get through the holidays. You see the result," with a wave of her hand towards the unduly plump part of her face; "so take warning and never put off 'til to-morrow when you can go to the dentist to-day. Mousie's going with me, this morning. Mother never can endure pain."

"Does it hurt much?" Mary asked sympathetically.

"No, not now, fortunately, but it certainly was busy during the night, grinding away for dear life. I scarcely slept at all. I'm so sorry, Mary."

"So am I, you poor thing! But never mind," Mary spoke soothingly; "it will soon be over."

"I don't mean that! I'm sorry to spoil your day's shopping. This is almost the only free day we have, and I know you need the things. Mother has a séance with her dressmaker at eleven, and a board meeting at two, so she can't help you. Anyway, she detests shopping. She has her things sent here. Abby is to spend the day with Mme. Archambeau. The old lady telephoned for her before she was dressed for breakfast, and I urged her to go. Beth and Belle have planned to go to the Aquarium to-day, but they can put it off."

"I wouldn't ask them, Grace, much as I'd like

to have their company," Mary spoke decidedly. "They've been talking Aquarium ever since they got here, so I hope they'll do it thoroughly. Then, perhaps, they'll drop the subject."

"I'll send Élise with you. She has very good taste, French people usually have, and she can tell you whether the suit fits properly. Too bad! I had planned such a jolly day. I was going to take you to lunch at the quaintest little tea-room you ever saw. It was a stable at one time, so all its decorations are in keeping with its original use. There are whips and spurs, saddles and bridles on the walls, and a boy dressed like a jockey opens the door. The stalls are still there, and are used as tiny separate rooms. I'm so disappointed. I should have gone, anyway, with a veil over my face, but the dentist has ordered me to come at once and have the tooth treated. I can't even promise to meet you later. He says I must stay in all the rest of the day, for fear of catching cold."

"Don't bother about it, Grace. Just take care of yourself. I'm as sorry for you as I can be. Please don't send the maid, though: I can shop better by myself. I've always had to make my own decisions, you know. Besides, I seldom have trouble in finding a suit to fit me."

"Yes, I know," Grace answered with a laugh. "Belle says you are 'built according to Hoyle!' I'll be all right by to-morrow, though. The

dentist says the swelling will disappear as quickly as it came."

"Good-by, my swell friend," Mary called after her, as Grace hurried out.

Mary mounted one of the Fifth Avenue automobiles, and her day's work began in earnest; for it was work at that crowded season. She was born with the shopper's instinct, and, as she told Grace, had chosen her own things for years. She was fortunate, too, in finding the articles she wanted, in the proper sizes, but when the store clocks pointed to half-past twelve, lunch began to assume great importance, and by one o'clock its insistent demands could not be ignored. She had forgotten to ask Grace where the charming stable-tea-room was located, so she chose a restaurant in the shopping district instead. She ordered a hearty, if somewhat mixed lunch, and dawdled over it luxuriously, resting after her strenuous morning.

Two young men, unmistakably college students, sat at a table in the alcove near by. One of them glanced at her curiously from time to time. He was a tall, dark lad, and his accent, when he addressed his companion, betrayed his Southern birth.

"Do you think you'll know her when you see her again?" his companion asked, much amused at his friend's covert scrutiny. "You ought to!"

"I've met her somewhere," the Southerner answered, with a puzzled frown; "but I can't

remember where. Probably she's a Barnard girl. I reckon she's good-looking, all right. Don't you agree with me? "

" Oh! I don't know," the other answered with assumed indifference. " Girls are not much in my line. I'm in for some good hard work, these next two years. The governor and the mater expect me to graduate ' cum dignitate ' and all that sort of thing, so I really haven't time to bother with trifles."

Trifles! His friend's eyes twinkled, but he made no comment, just then, at any rate.

" I've met that girl somewhere or other, but where, I can't remember," he said, returning to the original theme.

" Charmingly graphic you are, Lee; somewhere, somehow, sometime! "

" I've been racking my brain — "

" Racking what? " the other questioned mockingly. " Oh! say, now, Lee, impossible! "

" You can grin all you want," Lee answered imperturbably. " I'll solve the puzzle by and by. I wish she'd turn this way so that I could see her face; then I — What's the trouble, I wonder? " he ended suddenly.

The object of his furtive attention, after distractedly searching muff and shopping-bag, and feeling in all her coat pockets, had risen to her feet, shaken her skirts vigorously, and was scanning

the floor beneath the table with eager eyes. It was then that the young man had his wish granted, for Mary turned fully towards them a very anxious, embarrassed face. With an exclamation of pleased surprise, the young Southerner stepped towards her, with hand outstretched and face beaming.

"Miss Livingston! Don't you remember me?"

Mary looked up in astonishment, her eyes filled with distressed tears, and answered in a voice she tried hard to control.

"I—I don't—yes, I do, too! You are one of the 'Long Legged Lobsters! I mean— Oh! please excuse me."

Both of them burst into a hearty laugh at some remembrance. Lee's friend at the other table looked decidedly interested.

"That's what the village youngsters used to call you Long Lake Lodge boys," she apologized, still laughing. "I know you are one of the LLL's, but —"

"I'm Carrollton, Lee Carrollton, of Georgia," he reminded her, somewhat hurt that she had forgotten his name after all the attentions he and his friends had showered upon the Heart's Ease party, two summers ago, during the vacation in Maine.

"I hadn't forgotten you, Mr. Carrollton," Mary said gently, "but for a moment I couldn't remember your name."

"Oh!" His tone was mollified by her words. "But you are in trouble. Can't I be of service? Have you lost anything?"

"Only my purse!" she answered. "That's all; but it's enough, under the circumstances. It is just a small one, for change; I had all my purchases sent home C.O.D. But it has disappeared completely, and I've eaten my lunch," she ended comically.

"Don't worry about it, Miss Livingston," Lee answered reassuringly, taking prompt possession of her check. Mary gave an audible sigh of relief.

"I'm so glad you happened to be here! How could I ever have faced the cashier at the desk! She's a haughty-looking creature, I remember. She might have thought—I don't know what! Do they arrest people for things like that?"

"Of course," he answered soberly. "It's a prison offense: taking goods under false pretenses!" Then they both laughed again.

Lee's friend at the other table tried to catch his eye. He began signalling frantically, but without success. Lee was perfectly aware of his endeavors, but took a wicked pleasure in ignoring them. This delay and his "selfishness" made his friend furious. He opened his watch, consulted it ostentatiously, then snapped it shut with a loud click.

"I'm afraid I must tear myself away," Lee said

regretfully. "My friend and I have an engagement at two o'clock. If we were not so rushed I'd introduce him to you, with your permission, of course, but —"

The friend pricked up his ears, and started to rise from his chair, with the suggestive words: "No hurry, Lee! Subway will take us up in ten minutes. If your friend —" he stopped pointedly.

"My friend," Lee also paused in a tantalizing manner, "will excuse me, I know."

"Please give me your address," Mary urged, with an embarrassed blush. "I must return the money to you." She pointed to her check which he was holding in his hand. "It was not an invalid lunch, you know. I was near starvation, or so it seemed to me."

"Are you staying in New York, or just down for a day's shopping?" he asked eagerly.

"Five of the Fairmount girls are here for the holidays, at the Archers'. You remember Miss Archer?"

"Do I! When she knocked my bowling score all to pieces! I reckon I do. May I call and renew my acquaintance?" he went on urgently. "That Miss Mousie or whatever her name was, would like to see me, I know."

"Why —" Mary hesitated uncertainly, not feeling quite sure of Mrs. Archer's views upon the subject.

"I'll have to call for that money," he urged, with a mischievous smile upon his face. "If you send it, it might go astray, and I need it."

Mary laughed at the plaintive tone. The young fellow looked so eager, and she knew that the girls would all enjoy a chat over the jolly times they had had with the LLL's that summer at Heart's Ease, so she ended by saying cordially: "Do come. Mousie, Miss Munsing, I mean, will be glad to see you. Good-by, and thank you so much."

As she turned to go, Lee caught sight of his friend's face, black as a thunder-cloud, and might have relented had not his large sentiments about girls flashed into his mind.

"I wish I could have presented my friend to you, Miss Livingston," he said, loud enough to be heard at the other table. "I should have been glad to bring him with me when I call, but I fear I shall have to deny myself that pleasure. Girls are not much in his line, you know. His people expect him to graduate with honors, and all that sort of thing, so he hasn't time to bother with trifles." He winked knowingly, and Mary understood that he was quoting the words of his friend.

"We should have been glad to see him," she said brightly.

"Out of the question, I'm sorry to say." Lee shook his head regretfully. "He's a regular dig:

can't bear g— young ladies. Thank you, though, for the invitation."

At his request Mary gave him the Archers' address, then with a friendly little nod she started for the door. In passing the first table her muff swung against it. A little thud followed, and there lay the missing purse, almost at Carrollton's feet. It had evidently caught in a fold of the lining from which the blow on the table edge dislodged it.

Carrollton's face, as he picked it up and handed it to Mary, was not as pleased as it might have been.

"I — I'm sorry," he began hesitatingly.

"So am I, that I had to trouble you," Mary completed his sentence. "My check, please! Thank you. And don't forget that I am very grateful to you, just the same."

"I shall come to see Miss Munsing, anyway," Lee announced decisively. "She and I were especially congenial, that summer."

"Do come," Mary responded heartily; and then she took pity upon the young man fidgeting and fuming at the table near by, and added: "Bring your friend, too, if he can spare the time from his studies."

"Why on earth did you tell her that yarn about me not caring for girls, Lee?" his friend demanded furiously, as soon as Mary disappeared.

"Why? Isn't it true? You said so yourself."

“ But I — I meant girls in general. Why didn’t you introduce me? ”

“ Look here, Rod, do you think I’d do that when you had just finished telling me your views? I was mighty sorry, too, because those girls are just fine. They were in Maine, the summer before last, when I was studying at the LLL camp. Their log cabin was on the point almost opposite our boat-house. We had some jolly times together.”

“ How many girls were there? ” his friend asked sulkily.

“ Five, but one was pretty much of a dig, like you,” Lee answered teasingly.

“ Oh, dry up! ”

“ She was a nice girl, though, the dig, I mean; but I liked this one, Miss Livingston, the best of all. You ought to have seen her take charge the time some woods got afire! I’m going to call at the Archers’ soon.”

“ So am I! ” was the prompt response. “ She included me; I heard her.”

“ All right! Don’t get excited, old man! It shall go with its friend, so it shall, and see the pretty ladies! Joking aside, Rod, I wouldn’t go without you for the world. There! Now have I squared myself? ”

His friend nodded.

“ I’m going to ask mother,” Lee continued,

"to invite the girls to tea. Mother's spending the winter north, you know."

"To be near her 'ittie bitsie boysie!" his friend chanted tauntingly. "If she knew how close to annihilation that same 'ittie boysie' was a few minutes ago, she'd want to be still nearer!"

When Mary reached home, Grace had returned, feeling and looking much better.

"'Richard is himself again!'" she quoted with a laugh, as she examined her face in the long mirror. "He says I'll be able to go out to-morrow."

Beth and Belle returned soon after, with vivid accounts of the wonders of the Aquarium, and Abby was full of her day's experiences. After dinner they gathered around the big open fire in the library, to talk things over. Mary set the ball rolling, by relating her mishap, and the unexpected encounter which followed. She ended by telling, with many misgivings, of the invitation she had extended to the young men.

"Mr. Carrollton is in Columbia. He didn't go home for the holidays because his mother is here for the winter. She's staying at the Plaza, I think he said. He teased that friend of his unmercifully; I really felt sorry for the poor boy. Was it wrong to tell them that they could call, Mousie?" she questioned anxiously.

Mousie assured her that the young Southerner and his friend would be welcome.

“At least,” she ended mischievously, “I myself shall be glad to see that boy again. If the rest of you don’t feel that way, I’ll excuse you when he comes. I only hope, though, that he will know when to go home,” she added fervently. “Those boys seemed to lose all account of time, at Heart’s Ease. It was not hard to invite a whole crowd to leave, but it might be embarrassing to suggest the idea to one young man!”

“Just begin on *Home, Sweet Home* when the time’s up,” Belle advised. “I’ll play it for you on my ‘combiatta.’ All you have to do is to give me a signal.”

Mousie laughed at this proposed solution of the difficulty, but refused to commit herself as to its efficiency.

Abby gave them an account of her day in such a spirited manner that the girls stared at her in astonishment.

“I just wish you could see that Bowery Mission,” she ended her enthusiastic recital. “It hurts you, but it does you good, too. They expect to furnish a regular Christmas dinner for several thousand people; and all during the winter, they feed almost two thousand men. The ‘bread line,’ as they call it, forms every night about twelve o’clock. Most of them are out of work, discouraged and hungry, but not the kind of men who would steal, you know. They give them hot

coffee and rolls. They all drink their coffee, the superintendent says, but they have to keep watch to see which men hide their rolls."

"Hide them?" Grace repeated. "Why, I thought they were hungry!"

"They are," Abby replied gravely, "but they have families at home who are hungry, too! Isn't it pitiful? Whenever they see a man put his roll into his pocket, they hand him a bag with extra ones in it."

There was a thoughtful silence around the fire after Abby finished her account, so deeply did its pathos appeal to them. Each girl resolved that some bit of finery or some longed-for luxury should be sacrificed, and the money used towards furthering the good work of the Mission. The "Cry of the City" was making itself heard, even by their young ears.

Later on, Beth and Belle described their jaunt to the Battery, where they had explored one of the big fire-boats, as well as visited the Aquarium. They considered the "fish-house" very fascinating, so much so, in fact, that Belle had spent many precious minutes since their return, composing a "pome" about it. This was not at all unusual: the Academy girls were the unblushing authors of all sorts of nonsense rhymes: it had become a habit with them. Very little urging was needed to induce Belle to favor them with her verses.

RECEPTION DAY AT THE AQUARIUM

(Battery by the Sea.)

The Aquarium folk receive, each fine day.
I stopped at their round-house, my calls to pay.
I saw ANGEL FISH shining golden and blue,
The yellow and black of Miss BUTTERFLY, too.

I then made a call on the GREEN MORAY,
Who lives in two tanks; he's quite swell, by the way!
Remember the sea-serpent story so old?
It's only this same GREEN MORAY, I am told!

Next came the big BASS, and the CROCODILE larky,
(They say — don't repeat this — he swallowed a darky!)
Then the SKATE, upon whom Father Neptune once sat;
Poor fellow! he's mashed out quite flat; think of that!

Young LOBSTER, in green, made queer goo-goo eyes,
And waved his long feelers in frightened surprise.
He always arrives in the brightest of red,
When visiting me; the heat goes to his head.

The SEAL, little rascal, was so fond of fun,
He splashed out the water, and made people run.
If I were his mother, and that was my tank,
I know what I'd do to him — yes, sir! I'd spank!

The MUD TURTLES sat in a row, on a log,
And near, was the tank of the gay young SEA-DOG.
The HORSE-SHOE CRAB wore such a very big shell,
He looked like a child under father's umbrell'.

I wanted to visit the rich SPECKLED TROUT
But their tank was curtained; I think they were out.
Perhaps they were hunting for Tennyson's brook,
A place recommended as free from the hook.

I wonder if Fishville will call upon me.

For some of them, there, I'd be quite glad to see.

I'd welcome the TERRAPIN, PERCH, and the BASS,

And even plain WHITE-FISH, if dressed in rich "sass."

I'm "out" to the CAT FISH; I think he's a crank!

The SHAD, too, may rest her old bones in her tank;

If SPIDER CRAB calls, I shall keep out of sight;

I'm "home" to young LOBSTER, though; he is all right!

"Beware of Pick Pockets!" signs say, on the wall.

That wasn't my danger, no, no! not at all!

I suffered worse loss; for when time came to part

From those queer finny creatures, I'd lost — yes — my heart!

The girls had a hearty laugh over Belle's poetical description of the fascinations of the Aquarium. A moment's silence followed, during which several of the party looked as though the "Sandman" had broadened his field of activity by including big girls, too, in his rounds.

"I move —" Grace began slowly.

"We move!" Belle finished promptly.

A sleepy procession started up the stairs, the Quartette repeating their favorite rhyme, one line each.

"Oh put me in my little bed!"

"And pull the sheet up to my head!"

"Then tuck the covers round my feet!"

"And leave me to my slumbers sweet!"

When Abby astonished them by adding a new line :

"I'll wake up rested and ready to eat!"

CHAPTER XX

DISOBEDIENCE

THE next day was spent by the Quartette in shopping for the Day Nursery Christmas treat. Abby excused herself, with earnest apologies to the rest, and again spent the day with her new friend.

"Mme. Archambeau spoke to me herself about it," Mr. Archer told the girls after Abby left. "She had tears in her dear old eyes, when she begged us not to deprive her of her day's 'sunshine!' Abby seems as eager to go, as she is to have her, but she would not consent until I assured her that it was all right."

"Of course it's all right," Grace assented decidedly. "Abby doesn't care for shopping, anyhow; and besides we four are surely enough to choose the presents for those little tots at the Day Nursery. I'm glad she's enjoying herself in her own way, and she's welcome to Mme. Archambeau: I wouldn't want to be in her place."

"Possibly the Madame wouldn't want you to be," her father answered drily. "As for his majesty, Tiddle-de-Winks, I think he would efface

himself at the first sound of your voice, eh, Grace? Good-by, girls! Be good, and you'll be — ”

“ Lonesome! ” Belle finished promptly. “ We will! Good-by! ”

That evening they gathered as usual around the library fire, too tired after their day's rush of shopping and sight-seeing to care for any festivity, even had anything been planned. But Grace had wisely left these before-Christmas evenings free just on this account. The week between Christmas and New Year's, when shopping would be over, would be time enough for evening affairs.

“ What did you decide upon for the Day Nursery presents? ” Abby asked. “ Are they to have two apiece this year as usual? ”

“ Yes, indeed, ” Beth answered proudly. “ One useful gift and one toy. ”

Beth was still president of the “ Rosebud ” society, a very energetic president; not as strenuous, possibly, as Sally Harper had been, but very much easier to work with, in the opinion of the members. Her rule, too, was every bit as beneficent for the little ones in the Nursery.

“ We bought dolls for the girls, ” Mary informed Abby. “ Colonel Arnold gave us an extra donation so that we could get what he calls the ‘ open and shut ’ kind. ”

The girls all laughed at this attempt of the Colonel's to express his ideas on the doll question.

"It sounds like a manikin!" Abby said, still laughing. "Are the Day Nursery youngsters studying Anatomy and Physiology?"

"He means dolls that open and shut their eyes, that's all," Belle explained. "We bought such pretty ones. Some have dark curls and dark eyes; some are blond with blue eyes. I'd like to have one of them myself. My favorite doll used to be a rag one. I reckon Mammy dressed it at least a hundred times."

"That reminds me," Beth began impressively, "that we have all those dolls to dress."

"And we can't fall back on our dear 'Lady' this year," Grace added with a sigh.

"We must not wait too late to pack the Nursery box, either," Beth reminded them. "The express companies are all rushed at this season of the year."

"I think I can arrange it, Beth," Grace answered readily. "I'll ask all the girls I can think of, for the twenty-third. We don't have our dress-rehearsal until evening, so it won't interfere with that. I'll tell each girl that she must be responsible for the trousseau of one doll. She can bring her materials with her. Mousie can get us up a nice little luncheon."

"But the matron thought we ought to dress them all alike," Mary reminded her. "She suggested dark, checked gingham. I don't like the idea one bit, myself: seems too much like an

orphan asylum, and these dollies of ours will have very devoted little mothers, I know that!"

"I agree with you, Mary," Beth said, with a smile at her room-mate. "We'll compromise by dressing them all in washable material. The dresses must come off, too: no sewed-on gowns for these 'open and shuts' of ours!"

"But think of the button-holes!" Belle exclaimed in dismay.

"I'll do the button-holes for your doll, if you'll sew on the val for mine," Mary offered promptly. "I detest putting narrow lace on anything. It takes so much measuring to see how much more you have to do. The first petticoat I ever made, girls —"

"And the last!" Grace whispered slyly.

"Much you know about it!" Mary flashed out indignantly. "That first petticoat was trimmed with a ruffle edged with val. I thought I'd never get it sewed on. Then I rushed the ruffle into place and found that it was at least six inches short after I had almost finished sewing it on. I couldn't bear the idea of cutting more ruffling and piecing it on, and then sewing on more lace, so I laid a fold all the way down the skirt and sewed the ruffle over it. I handed it to mother with its best foot, I mean side, foremost, but —"

"But it didn't work," Belle declared positively. Mary nodded her head.

“And you did!”

“I did! It made a deep impression on me. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the grim desperation with which I set to work again on that everlasting old ruffle! I suppose it did me good though,” she said with a comical sigh of resignation; “I measure things now!”

“You didn’t tell me what you bought for the boys,” Abby asked interestedly.

“We bought them each a knife,” Grace answered. “They are perfect beauties: I know they’ll enjoy them. I only hope they won’t carve their dear little selves all to pieces with them. I’m sure there must be a special Providence watching over small boys, or else there would never be any men.”

Mr. Archer was passing through the hall as Grace spoke. He chuckled to himself, then put his head in at the door and said significantly: “Sometimes there’s a hurry-up call on that same ‘Special Providence’ from some of the gentler sex, even from girls of fifteen or sixteen. They say that virtue is its own reward. I wonder if disobedience brings its reward, too?”

To Abby his words were meaningless, but the Quartette looked at him in blank dismay.

“Why, father, what do you mean?” Grace tried in vain to speak innocently.

“I wonder!” her father mimicked mockingly.

“Who told you about it?” Grace asked.

“About what?” was the teasing reply, at which the girls fidgeted uneasily, looking decidedly foolish, while Abby glanced from one to the other, wondering what it was all about.

“You know — what you are talking about,” Grace answered in somewhat involved phraseology.

“A little bird told me,” he said gravely, walking into the room. “I must confess that I accused that same little bird of — well, prevaricating, at least. I informed that carrier-pigeon that my daughter was an obedient girl; that she had had definite commands in regard to certain things; and that I trusted her fully. But the pigeon persisted in his story until I was forced to investigate for myself. You may judge of my disappointment in the result of that investigation.”

He spoke more severely than they had ever heard him speak, and without a smile turned and left the room.

“What does he mean?” Abby’s question broke an embarrassed silence during which Grace sobbed heart-brokenly, and the rest stared gloomily into the depths of the glowing fire. “It sounds like a series of conundrums, ‘about what you are talking about’ and ‘the result of my investigation.’”

Grace sat up and wiped her eyes, before she answered Abby’s question.

"We're not particularly proud of it," she said slowly. "In fact we felt so ashamed that we decided not to say anything about it. I say 'we' but it was all my fault."

"No, it wasn't either!" Belle contradicted sharply. "Mary and I both urged you. Beth is the only innocent one, because she really opposed it."

"Ring around a rosy!" Abby repeated impatiently; "that's what you girls are playing while I'm actually suffering from unappeased curiosity. Can any of you say anything that means anything?"

"I'll tell you, Abby," Grace said, tears gathering again in her eyes. "When we went to buy the Day Nursery gifts to-day, we were late in starting. Then Evans, our chauffeur, had to stop at the agent's on some business for father, and he kept us waiting so long that we grew impatient. The morning was flying away and we had all those things to buy, besides our own personal gifts. Finally we decided to go on; so I left word with one of the office attendants for Evans to meet us at Altman's. We were in the new car, but it's the same make as the old one, and I've often handled that, when Evans was in it. Not on Fifth Avenue, or Broadway, or in the shopping district, though, only in the Park and on the quiet streets, but I understood it perfectly.

"I took the car to Altman's beautifully, didn't I?"

An affirmative nod was her only answer.

"We didn't find the things we wanted there, so we came out before Evans arrived. We were in such a hurry, checking off our lists, and deciding what we were to get, that we forgot all about him, and jumped into the car and started off. I didn't have a bit of trouble, and we were spinning along beautifully when a mounted policeman dashed up to us, and ordered us to stop."

"Speeding?" Abby questioned breathlessly.

"No! You'll see in a minute. We couldn't say a word at first, we were so horrified. His tone was dreadful." Grace's face burned at the remembrance of it. "I think, though, that he soon realized how frightened we were, because he spoke more gently."

"'Young ladies like you ought not to play pranks with other people's cars!' Imagine, Abby! 'Other people's cars!' He was a young giant, but he treated us as though he were a grandfather and we were about six! We all recovered our powers of speech, at the same time, and all talked at once, even Beth! It was a perfect flood! We had turned into a quiet cross-street, but even there several people had stopped, and were watching us curiously."

"'You are mistaken,' I told him. 'This is our

own car: the monogram is on the front — G. P. A. You may see for yourself.' ”

“ Grace spoke with such freezing dignity,” Belle interrupted, “that when she said, ‘I am Miss Archer,’ I almost expected to see the officer tumble out of his saddle, frozen stiff. I’m glad she never uses that icy tone in number seventeen. And to think that she has the reputation at Fairmount for being so sweet and gentle! Go on, Grace.”

“ The officer bent down to look at the front of the car, then said, with a laugh: ‘ But these initials are J. B. B. I understand your mistake, Miss Archer. Where did you leave your car? ’ ”

“ ‘ We didn’t know that we had left it,’ I told him. ‘ We were shopping at Altman’s.’ ”

“ ‘ Your car is probably there yet,’ he said. ‘ I am sorry for this misunderstanding, but when the starter informed me that a car was missing, and pointed it out just as you were turning the corner, it was my duty to investigate. The owner of this car was just ready to start, but stepped out for a moment to examine another one, he told me, and when he turned around, his car had disappeared. You had better go back and — ’ ”

“ Just then we caught sight of Evans coming along very slowly, looking as black as a thundercloud,” Mary went on with the story; “and Grace cut the officer short. ‘ There’s our car! There it is!’ Any one would have thought that we were

shipwrecked mariners, discovering a sail. Even his majesty the policeman laughed, didn't he, Belle? But he tried to hide it."

"When Evans came up the officer explained the trouble to him," Grace again took up the narrative, "and we got into our car while he took the 'J. B. B.' back to the store. Those cars were certainly twins — same make, same color, even the same fittings, so it's no wonder I made the mistake. Any one might have done just the same thing, especially as the owner of the 'J. B. B.' was examining our car at the time. And we were in such a hurry, too!"

Grace was vainly trying to find excuse where none was to be found, for the fact remained that she had run the car without the chauffeur, contrary to her father's expressed wish. She had just finished telling the story to Abby, when an imperative masculine voice made itself heard from the hall.

"I must see Miss Archer herself, I tell you."

"Madame is out and Miss Archer is not receiving," was the butler's firm reply.

"She'll receive me," was the confident assurance, "I want to get the details of her — er — accident, to-day."

The butler informed the insistent young man that there had been no accident of any kind that day.

"Oh, yes, there was! I'm from the ——" he

mentioned the name of a well-known paper which was celebrated for its sensational "news." "Give Miss Archer my card, please, and tell her it will be better to give me the story at first hand."

The girls listened to the dialogue in breathless consternation, as the purpose of the visit dawned upon them. A "write-up" in a common newspaper! Grace's pale, distressed face showed that she realized the ugly results of her disobedience in all its unpleasing possibilities. She trembled with dread, wondering how she could bear such a thing. Suddenly her father's voice reached her. Never had his tones sounded so comforting.

The unseen audience listened intently to the colloquy which ensued. The thought of eavesdropping never entered their minds, so aghast were they at this embarrassing dénouement. They confidently expected the annihilation of the intruder on the spot, but, to their surprise, Mr. Archer addressed him politely, even genially.

"How do you do, sir! You represent the——?" mentioning the name of the paper.

"Yes, sir," the young man answered in equally affable tones. "I am glad to meet you, sir, very glad."

"Been on the staff long?"

"No, sir! I'm a Princeton man, just graduated last year. I want to use my reportorial work as a stepping-stone to a literary career."

" Ah, I see! Princeton, you say? I'm a Princeton man myself. My boy's there now. The only college, eh? Never go back on the orange and black! "

" No, sir, never! And now about that affair to-day, sir. Will you give me the details of the accident? "

" There was no accident; my daughter simply made a mistake in her motor, that's all." Mr. Archer began, while the unseen listeners gasped in dismay. Why, they had thought he would refuse emphatically, but he was too wise for that. He realized the power of the press. " It was careless, I acknowledge, but she's just a school-girl, you know. We men understand how embarrassing any publicity would be for her and her guests. I feel sure you realize this, Mr. — "

" Olcott, sir."

" Thank you, Mr. Olcott."

" Ye—yes, but — I — I hoped I had a scoop, sir. You see, I'm new on the paper, and have to make my mark."

" But this little affair has no news value whatever," Mr. Archer urged quietly.

" No, I know it, but the public like to read such things. With a picture and big headlines — "

" Of course, if it were an item of general interest," the grave voice interrupted, " I would hesitate

to make such a request, but under the circumstances I am going to ask you to suppress all mention of it."

There was a moment's pause, an anxious one to the listeners, then the young man's reply came with obvious unwillingness, his voice betraying his keen disappointment.

"All right, sir! I understand. I wish you good-evening."

Mr. Archer hesitated a moment. He had made it his business policy to avoid interviewers as much as possible. He was decidedly averse to figuring in newspapers, especially of the type represented by the reporter before him. But he appreciated the sacrifice the young fellow was making, and liked his manly way of doing it. In the end this appreciation conquered his distaste.

"Wait a moment, my boy," he said kindly. "How would you like to give your paper a little article on the financial outlook? Then your time will not be wasted."

"You mean —" the young man's voice was boyishly eager.

"Yes. Come into my study and we'll talk things over."

The two men walked down the hall, and the girls heard the study door shut, then Grace's fair head went down upon the arm of her chair, and her sobs broke forth anew.

“ Dear, dear Daddy! ” she said, after the storm had subsided. “ You don’t know how he hates that sort of thing, girls. But he did it just for me. Isn’t he the dearest father? ”

“ He is! ” was the subdued but earnest response. Then the four guilty ones, with Abby in attendance, flitted cautiously past the study door, on their way up-stairs.

The next day Mr. Archer never referred to the matter in any way, so the girls did not know whether he was aware of his unseen audience the night before, or not. But Mary happened to be reading in the library after breakfast, that morning, when Mrs. Archer entered the room. The lady did not see her as she was curled up among the pillows on the great couch in the alcove. She advanced to the table with its burden of current magazines, and was examining them listlessly, when an open newspaper attracted her notice, and called forth an exclamation of disgust.

“ I do not want such a paper in the house,” she muttered angrily. “ I don’t see how it came here.”

She picked it up to toss it into the scrap-basket, but paused, staring fixedly at the front page, then read on with compressed lips and flashing eyes. Mr. Archer strolled in, just then. He was in house-coat and slippers, his hands in his pockets.

“ Did you see this, George? ” she asked sharply,

indicating the black head-lines, which were staring enough to be read across the room.

GEORGE ARCHER ON THE FINANCIAL SITUATION!

THE MONEYED MAN'S OPTIMISTIC OUTLOOK!

A PERSONAL WORD FROM THE WIZARD OF FINANCE!

"Yes," he answered simply, smiling at the bombastic headings, while Mary held her breath, fearing that disclosure was imminent. "That reporter was a pretty decent sort of a chap, just a boy. Princeton, too, by the way. It's all right!"

"Oh! I'm so glad!" Mary whispered to herself. "I was afraid he'd tell her. He's just kind clear through!"

CHAPTER XXI

BELLE'S RUSE

It had been decided to have the play on Christmas eve. Not many rehearsals were necessary, so it would interfere very little, if at all, with preparations for Christmas. The Fairmount girls had been thoroughly drilled in their lines, and the two additions to the cast, Miss Allyn and Miss Arkwright, had what Belle called "animation parts."

"Those two rôles remind me of the command that used to be impressed upon my small brain when company was expected: 'Be a pretty lil gal, an' don't talk none.' "

Belle and Mary were in their element when amateur dramatics were in question. Both girls had genuine talent for acting, Belle, especially. The Academy had never had her superior.

She was the heroine, whose father had suddenly become rich from his mining ventures. She intended to wear a jaunty, white cloth tennis suit with gold-colored facings, in one act, and a long, trailing evening dress of spangled chiffon, in the other. The first costume was her own, but the

second one had been cleverly adapted by Mousie from a gown in Mrs. Archer's wardrobe. Mary, the hero, who was supposed to have a family tree which towered heavenward, and whose newest branches objected to the mine-owner's daughter, was to wear evening clothes of Hal Archer's; while Abby, the lovable old "Daddy," had appropriated an old, much-worn business suit belonging to Mr. Archer.

When it developed that Mrs. Archer's "handful" of invited guests had resolved itself into over a hundred people, the fact made little impression upon the two principals in the play, but the rest of the company were fairly aghast. But the Archer ballroom was more than equal to this demand upon its capacity, and Mrs. Archer displayed a supreme faith in her young "stars" and their ultimate success.

It was Fairmount's rule, rigidly adhered to, not to admit masculine visitors to either the basket-ball games or the school plays. Mrs. Archer decided to follow the rule in this case, also.

"You are still Fairmount girls, you know, even if it is the holiday season, so I dare not take the responsibility of setting aside good Miss Horton's decisions. But we will stretch the rule, just a wee bit," she added laughingly, "and admit a few gray-heads. I don't think Miss Horton will object.

She probably had the military school in mind in her prohibition, did she not? "

" Yes, ma'am," the girls acknowledged meekly.

" Eustis appointed a regular delegation of cadets the year we gave this play, to reason with Miss Horton," Belle told her. " Just for fun we sent them invitations, each with a little string tied to it. They didn't see the joke at first, but they realized what a stout little string it was, when Miss Horton pulled back the invitations! "

" We'd have to stretch the rule, anyway," Grace declared with decision. " Colonel Arnold's coming. We couldn't possibly shut him out. Even Miss Horton often makes an exception in his case. He's a gray-head, so it's all right. But there's father! "

Mrs. Archer laughed at the comical expressions of dismay upon the girls' faces, for by no stretch of the imagination could Mr. Archer be called gray-haired; nor, indeed, could any color of the rainbow be applied to him in that respect. He frankly referred to his absent locks as " not lost, but gone before! "

" Please stretch your rule another point," he implored, when he heard of the argument, " and include me and my fellow-sufferers. You surely don't want the whole bald-headed row to be left empty! Besides, after giving me allopathic doses of that play, at breakfast, lunch and dinner

for over a week, you couldn't possibly be heartless enough to shut me out now! If you did it would be a touching case for the S. P. C.!"

The girls laughed at his nonsense, and assured him heartily that no appeal to the S. P. C. or any one else was needed: he was absolutely necessary to their success and happiness on the eventful occasion.

There were a number of rehearsals sandwiched in between shopping and sight-seeing, but the night before the performance was set for the full-dress rehearsal. This arrangement left the day free for the "dress-making party" which Grace had planned. The young seamstresses were to gather at nine sharp, and put in a good morning's work. This would leave a part of the afternoon, at least, for attending to forgotten bits of shopping and dispatching belated gifts. It had been decided to dress the "open and shuts" like real babies, with long dresses, little caps tied under the chin, and capes or cloaks. They already possessed dainty strapped slippers and white socks. There were sixteen workers in all, and the sewing progressed to an accompaniment of girlish laughter and chatter.

Belle and Beth got up early that morning and began work upon their doll clothes as soon as they were dressed. Just before luncheon was served they excused themselves, as they had to exchange

some articles which were not what they had ordered. The exchange, with its accompanying "red tape" much shortened by a personal note from Mrs. Archer, was effected in one-half the time they had expected to give to it, so Belle decided to spend the remainder of the afternoon at the Metropolitan Museum. Beth, however, decided to go home. It was quite dark when Belle returned. She hurried up-stairs to remove her wraps, anxious to join the gay group about the tea-table.

The lights in the upper hall had not yet been turned on, but Belle was familiar with the house, so she sped swiftly towards the steps on her way to the library. Just as she reached the head of the stairs she saw a manly form strolling out of Grace's room, and stopped in surprise.

"Why, there's Mary!" she thought. "I wonder why she dressed so early. The rehearsal doesn't begin until eight-thirty. Surely she doesn't intend to dine in that costume!"

"Good evening!" she called aloud, in a high-pitched, exaggerated tone. "I was not aware that we were to have the pleasure of your company just now. You certainly are good-looking! Even handsomer than I expected!"

The figure stopped short, stammering something unintelligible.

"Oh, don't try to be formal, please! I know who

you are, and you know me, so it's unnecessary. You certainly look handsome. I'm almost tempted to — " she finished her sentence with a mocking little laugh.

"Do! I'm perfectly willing!" came the prompt retort, in tones unmistakably masculine.

Belle's laugh ended suddenly. She stared aghast at the figure before her, then, as he reached for the electric light switch, she fled, with an incoherent murmur of apology and explanation, and sought refuge in the first room she reached. The young man stared after the flying figure, then laughed to himself as he went on down the stairs.

"Case of mistaken identity, evidently!" he decided. "But I didn't know Grace had any men staying here. That girl seemed to know him pretty well, whoever he was. The plot thickens! I think I'll enjoy unraveling it. Wonder which one she is? Too dark to see, and her voice was disguised, I'm sure. I'll soon find out, though."

The newcomer strolled into the library, his appearance creating quite a sensation. He was greeted by a rush and a regular bear-hug from Grace, and smiles of pleased recognition from the girls of the neighborhood. None of the Fairmount girls was there, but Mary appeared soon afterwards.

"My brother Hal, Mary," Grace introduced him. "What's the matter? You look flurried."

"I — I rushed a bit," Mary explained breath-

lessly, while Hal scrutinized her curiously, deciding finally that it was not she whom he had encountered in the hall above.

"This is a genuine surprise, Hal," Grace assured him delightedly. "I wonder what brought you away from the charms of the winter wilds, Buddy?" she asked slyly.

"I wonder!" he repeated imperturbably. He loved to tease, yet he himself was not easily teased.

"Are you coming to the play to-morrow night, Hal?" Janet Arkwright asked, after they had discussed her recent residence abroad. "It's going to be fine!"

"Play? What play?" he demanded, in injured tones. "Nice way to ignore a fellow, isn't it? Take pity on me, Janie, and enlighten my ignorance. I've just landed, remember; but if there's a theater party on hand, count me in, please."

"It's not a theater party," Janet assured him. "It's amateur dramatics. Grace and her guests are repeating the play they gave at Fairmount last year. It's to be for charity, you know, to help the Blind Babies. We're going to have such fun. I'm in it, almost a walking lady; but I have a few lines. Do come!"

"Dee-lighted!" Hal responded promptly. "I'll bring the rest of the boys, too, the hunting party. We felt the lure of the Christmas city too strong to resist, so here we are! You ought to have

seen the post-grad who was tutoring us, when we decided to come home! Disgusted? Well, rather! Of course we'll come!"

"Of course you will — not!" Grace interrupted decisively. "Janet doesn't understand our Academy rule, or she wouldn't invite you. No men admitted except —" she paused tantalizingly.

"Except the family!" he promptly filled in the pause. "Too bad! That cuts the fellows out!"

"No, sir! Except graybeards and bald-heads," his sister corrected laughingly. "Now where do you come in?"

"I don't!" he acknowledged in plaintive tones. "I seem to be out in the cold more than I was at the shack. What on earth, may I ask, is the reason for so strenuous a ruling?"

"It's because all the parts are taken by the girls, I suppose. Mary makes a handsome man, and Abby is an ideal father."

"Mary!" he ejaculated involuntarily, while the "handsome man" blushed in confusion. "Yes, I see!" he said, more to himself than to Grace, as light began to dawn upon his darkness.

"We are to have a full-dress rehearsal to-night," Grace went on, "so your absence is requested!"

"So that's the explanation of my enthusiastic hold-up," he thought to himself. "She murmured something about 'I thought it was —' before she

took flight. But which girl was it? That light should have been on an hour ago. I think Parkins is downright careless, and I'll tell father so. I wonder he stands it."

"Say, Grace," he began confidentially, "where are the rest of your friends? I heard there was a whole bunch."

"They'll be here pretty soon," Grace said. "They all scattered to finish any forgotten bits."

"Well, I know one that's not out," he thought. "I'll watch for her."

Just then Abby came in, tall and handsome, and flushed with happiness. She and Mme. Archambeau had spent the day at the Mission, and at a Newsboys' and Bootblacks' Club, and she was full of her interesting experiences.

"Not this one, either!" Hal decided. "She's just come in. I'll strike the right one pretty soon, by the process of elimination."

In the meantime Belle had slipped into her own room as soon as she was sure the young man had gone down-stairs. There she stormed up and down, with burning cheeks and flashing eyes. Even as a child she never could endure ridicule, yet now, all unconsciously, she had laid herself open to it.

"Why didn't he say something?" she muttered angrily. "He knew, whoever he is, that I thought he was Mary. I don't remember what I said to

him, but it was something unutterably silly. My voice was changed; that's one good thing. Anyway, it was probably some servant. But suppose — suppose it wasn't!"

She tiptoed to the head of the stairs just in time to hear the words: "My brother Hal, Mary!" That was enough! Her plan of action was formed then and there, and she flew back to her room to carry it out. Hurriedly donning hat and wraps, she slipped down the back stairs and went out by way of the servants' entrance. She marched briskly around the block, and ten minutes later rang the bell boldly, and with wraps still on, and face glowing from the frosty air, she went directly to the library.

"Please excuse me for being so late, Gracie," she apologized prettily. "I found the Museum perfectly fascinating." (So she had, earlier in the afternoon.) "I stayed until the last gong sounded. Even then one of the attendants was forced to escort me gently but firmly to the turnstile." (This, too, had happened, and the remembrance soothed her conscience.) "I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

"No, indeed, Belle," Grace assured her warmly. "I love the Museum, too, so I know how hard it is to tear one's self away. Let me introduce my brother, Belle. Miss Gray, Hal."

"I've known Grace so long," Belle said sweetly,

as she shook hands with the young man, "that her brother scarcely seems a stranger to me."

Her greeting was without embarrassment, and Hal, as he gallantly relieved her of her muff and boa, eliminated one more possibility.

"She's not the one; that's certain!"

"I thought you were in the snowy wilds of Long Island," Belle said lightly, "terrorizing the animal kingdom. Did they scare you away?"

"No, indeed," he replied, "but the Christmas call was too insistent. We found that becoming hermits in a wintry waste, with a tutor who rivaled Dickens in the way of 'Great Expectations,' was, well, not exactly hilarious, but no one liked to be the first to give in. We each planned to slip away quietly, leaving a note of explanation behind."

"And did you?" Belle asked, raising a laughingly expectant face to his.

"We did. We met at the station! Then we were so ashamed of ourselves that we hustled back after the P. G."

"P. G.?" Belle questioned curiously.

"Post-graduate, the tutor, you know. I feel sure that innocent dig thinks all our relatives are dead or dying, we rushed the poor fellow so!"

Belle laughed heartily over the story. He looked at her curiously, having heard so much about this bosom friend of his only sister. His admiring

glance noted the wonderful dark eyes, the masses of dark hair, and the clear, colorless complexion.

"Grace certainly has good taste," he decided; "but she's not the one I met up-stairs. Wouldn't mind it, if she were!"

"Have you mislaid any of your number?" he asked carelessly. "I thought sister intended to invite four school-mates."

"Beth isn't here, Miss Carter, I mean," Belle said. "She's so shy she always effaces herself if there are strangers about. There she comes now."

Beth, too, had been out after the sewing-bee, but had returned much earlier than Belle. Hal gazed at her in uncertainty, finding his self-appointed work in amateur detecting more difficult than he had believed possible.

"The only one at home," he thought. "She must be the one, of course, but —"

He was fond of teasing and his "hold-up" that afternoon was too good an opening to be neglected. Besides, he had set out to solve the young lady's identity, and he intended to do it if he could.

Beth blushed in embarrassment when she was introduced to the newcomer. The entertainment of a young man, even for five minutes, unless she were dancing with him, and conversation was unnecessary, was to her a genuine ordeal. Even a Eustis cadet seemed formidable. "And this

was a real college man!" she told Belle later. The latter chuckled mischievously as she watched the two, and caught scraps of the conversation. It was a decidedly one-sided affair, for Beth's contributions were chiefly "yes" or "no," or vague murmurs, which might mean anything.

"He thinks it's Beth, but he isn't quite sure," Belle said to herself. "I'm so glad I thought of my plan. I know he's a tease, like his father. Grace says he's even worse. He's simply determined to find out about it; but he won't! I'll be on guard every minute. I'm not going to pose as a joke for a crowd of college boys. He is handsomer than I thought, even from Grace's description. That's what I told him, I believe. Anyhow, it was all Mary's fault: she had no right to act that way. It was just a natural mistake to make under the circumstances; but I wish some one else had made it!"

The dinner that night was very jolly. Hal was placed between Belle and Beth at the table.

"Beth's the dearest girl," Belle confided to him as the soup was being removed, "only she's very shy. Something upset her this afternoon, so she's worse than ever."

This bit of information was advanced with deliberate intent to mislead the amateur detective. Something had upset Beth, so Belle knew that her statement was a truthful one. Beth had lost a ring

that she valued highly, because it was her new mother's first gift to her. It was a small diamond set within a circle of tiny pearls. Beth seldom wore it: Miss Horton disapproved of jewelry upon school-girls; but this visit seemed a fitting occasion for its use. She had made a thorough search of her trunk, her dressing-table, and the entire room, but with no results. She hesitated to speak to Grace about it, disliking to add the faintest touch of unpleasantness to so pleasant a party. All this wicked Belle knew, but deliberately refrained from communicating it to her inquisitive companion.

"Are you fond of detective stories?" she demanded with such abruptness that Hal started, and stared at her intently, so identical was the question with his own thoughts. "I am," Belle continued brightly. "Of course they are not literature, and they're dreadfully overdrawn; but they are exciting. Like solving a difficult proposition in geometry, don't you think so? I undertook a bit of detective work myself, not long ago."

"You did? Tell me about it."

Belle told him of the regrets from Stanleigh, and the subsequent discovery of the guilty ones. "After we'd almost given up hope, too!" she added.

"I'm engaged," he began, when Belle interrupted mockingly.

"Let me congratulate you!"

"Why — oh! pretty neat!" he threw his head back, and laughed so heartily that his father smiled in sympathy. "Well, I'm not, in that way at least," he assured Belle earnestly. "I was going to say that I'm engaged in a bit of detective work myself. Perhaps you could help me."

"I'd be glad to, if I can."

"Well, it's this way. I ran into some one in the hall this afternoon, and I've been anxious to — to apologize, but the young lady disappeared before I had an opportunity."

Belle's steady glance never wavered.

"Why don't you see her to-night if she's here, and tell her you had no chance to explain earlier?"

"But I don't know which girl it is!"

"You don't?" Belle's amazement was beautifully done. "I can't see —"

"That was my trouble exactly; I couldn't see. The hall was almost dark at the time."

"And there were so many girls up-stairs to-day," Belle said regretfully. "Grace had a sewing-party, you know, to dress the dolls for the Day Nursery children. We packed a big box for them. I'm afraid you'll have trouble in finding the right one. Too bad you haven't anything in the way of a clue: it's such fun to ferret out things. But I reckon the girl has forgotten all about it by this time."

"Perhaps," he replied doubtfully, "but I intend to keep on until I find her, just to satisfy myself."

"I wish you luck!" Belle said gaily, raising her glass of water. "Here's to the fair unknown! Or was she dark? These half-confidences are very trying."

"I'll tell you all about it when I succeed," he promised.

Belle silently echoed "When!" while Hal left the table firmly convinced that she was not the one. No girl could carry off the situation as she had done, if she were.

The dress rehearsal proceeded behind locked doors. It was a rather ragged affair, as is often the case.

"Poor rehearsal, good performance!" Belle prophesied hopefully. "We're all tired out from sewing and shopping and dissipation generally. Let's go to bed early."

"I should think you'd be afraid to go to bed at all," Beth said significantly, "after your performance this afternoon."

"What performance?" the rest demanded, as Belle tried to silence her tormentor by frowns and threatening gestures. "Go on, Beth! Tell us about it. What did she do?"

"Don't you dare!" Belle muttered fiercely, but Beth ignored the threat. She remembered

her own unanswered signals of distress when Hal Archer was left to her entertainment in the library, and rather enjoyed this opportunity for revenge.

“You know we didn’t wait for lunch to-day, because we thought it might take ever so long to exchange those things. By the time we had finished our shopping it was almost three o’clock, and we were really hungry. We happened to pass a window with live lobsters in it. Belle stopped and stared at them so long I actually had to pull her away. She said she had never had enough lobster in her life.”

“That’s what she used to say about clams, before we went to that shore dinner in Portland,” Grace reminded them. “But she stopped saying it after that.”

“Well, it’s true!” Belle defended herself. “We don’t get much sea-food at home — too far from the water: and we don’t have very much at Fairmount, do we? And I love it.”

“She wanted to go in and get some salad,” Beth went on; “but we were not sure what kind of a place it was, so we went to one of the store cafés. It was a lovely tea-room, with music, and dainty tables. It was crowded with ladies, so we were all right. Belle said she intended to have enough for once, so after the waiter had taken my order for scallops, he went over to Belle.

“‘Lobster salad, double portion, and a lobster

pâté,' she ordered calmly. The waiter wrote it down, then asked innocently: 'How many extra places shall I reserve, miss? ' "

There was a general laugh when Beth finished.

"What did you do with it all?" Grace asked, with a shudder; she disliked lobster as much as Belle liked it.

"Ate it!" Belle answered nonchalantly. "And for once in my life I had enough!"

"No wonder you couldn't eat your dinner! Brother Hal spoke to me about it. I'll have to tell him why, to relieve his anxiety."

"If you dare!" Belle's pause conveyed threats unutterable. "I'll probably dream a three-volume novel to-night. If I do I'll have it published, and become famous."

Whether it was due to her encounter with Hal Archer, or to her unusual indulgence in the toothsome sea-food, Belle did dream, that night; a "double-action night-mare!" she called it. In her dream she confided to the policeman at the Metropolitan Museum that he was far handsomer than she had expected to find him. He indignantly denied her assertion, but she persisted in it until a detective appeared, and requested her help in unraveling a mystery. He was searching for perpetual motion, he informed her, and had traced it to the Archer residence. Belle solemnly promised to turn it over to him should she be fortunate

enough to find it still there when she reached home.

As she started out on her quest, she found her way blocked by a solid phalanx of lobsters with claws uplifted in touching appeal, while their spokesman, the largest of them all, waved his feelers, and declaimed sepulchraly: "We don't care for red! We want to stay green!"

In hurrying to one side to avoid this delegation, Belle suddenly found herself on the floor, with a ray of bright winter sunshine streaming into her face.

A mischievous face was peering in at the door between the two rooms, and a girlish voice was speaking in taunting tones.

"So! my Lady of the Lobsters! that salad and the pâté evidently got in some good work after all! Actually pulled you out of bed! Think of it! In future, Miss Gray," the tone became the nasal twang of one of the Academy teachers, "I advise —"

Just what Mary advised will never be known. Belle scrambled to her feet, and made a dash for the door, but it was slammed and bolted in her face, while a teasing voice from the other side of the barrier, floated through the keyhole.

"Lobster salad, double portion, please, and a lobster pâté. That's all."

CHAPTER XXII

CHRISTMAS

EVERY hour of the day before Christmas was so fully occupied that the girls had little time to give to thoughts of the evening's ordeal. At the last moment they discovered that the express company would not guarantee to deliver the Day Nursery box on time.

"But it's just going to Fairmount!" Grace expostulated, when the driver called in answer to the summons sent in late the night before.

"Can't help it, miss. If it was only to the Bronx we couldn't promise positive. Just look at that wagon!"

He pointed with his whip, and the girls saw a great van so full that they wondered where he expected to put their box if he took it. They held an anxious consultation, and finally let the man depart without any addition to his burden.

At Grace's suggestion, they hurried down to Wall Street, to lay the matter before Mr. Archer. It was too important to trust to a mere telephone. Besides, to tell the truth, they felt conscience-stricken at the serious disappointment which their

thoughtless delay might bring to the expectant little ones.

"It will just spoil their Christmas," Grace told her father, almost in tears. "They were to have their tree to-night, and our things are the biggest part of it."

"I should say they are!" Belle added emphatically, marking off the items with her fingers as she spoke: "the sensible presents, the toys, the candies and the snapping-crackers! They can't have much of a tree with oranges and nuts."

"May I ask why so important a matter was delayed in this way?" Mr. Archer demanded in what Grace called his "office" voice.

"You may, but —" Grace stopped, unable to finish her sentence.

"But the answer?" he persisted.

"That's another story!" she laughed ruefully. "It's just 'because,' and that's no reason at all; but we're so sorry."

Mr. Archer's stern manner relaxed at sight of their genuine distress. It was easy to understand how the delay had occurred. He, too, had found the days preceding the holiday season fairly flying away, bringing Christmas, so long awaited, with unexpected suddenness.

"I'll send a private expressman for it," he settled the matter finally. "We can't take any further chances with so valuable a cargo as that."

And he was even better than his word, this busy man: he found time to send a long distance message to the anxious matron at the Day Nursery, assuring her that the Christmas presents would arrive in time for the evening's festivity. This was a precaution which had never even occurred to the girls.

When they found time to remember the program for the evening they felt decidedly nervous. A play in the Academy dining-room, with the Stanleigh Hall and Fairmount girls as an audience, was very different from the same play in an imposing Fifth Avenue ballroom, with more than a hundred "invitations" out.

"And at five dollars per invitation, too!" Beth repeated solemnly. Mrs. Archer happened to overhear the remark.

"Don't worry about the price of admission," she said reassuringly. "The people who are coming are more than willing to give to such a beautiful charity, and at the same time see our pretty little play. I could have disposed of five hundred tickets easily, especially if I had consented to remove the present restrictions. But I had to be firm because I really think we are right in adhering to Miss Horton's rule. If you were young ladies, it would be different. Besides, it's a novelty, so it has proved very attractive."

"But Hal says the family ought to be excepted,"

Grace informed her mother. "I told him we would keep strictly to the rule — gray hairs or none at all! He acted as though he was being abused: said that he and his friends had saved this evening for the play, and then were shut out. I asked him if he couldn't find one or two theatrical performances in New York to-night, besides ours!" Grace delivered her bit of sisterly sarcasm so comically, that every one joined in the laugh which followed.

"Anyhow, I'm glad I'm not in it," Beth declared, with an air of self-congratulation which the others found irresistibly amusing.

"So am I," Belle agreed frankly. "You'd be stage-struck surely, you dear old 'fraid-cat!' You remind me of a young man I read about. He took part in a play for the first time, and had only one line to say: 'The queen has swooned!' but he got a new combination each time he tried to say it. First he announced, 'The swoon has queened!' then 'The quoon has sweened!' and when even 'The sween has quooned!' failed to satisfy him he shouted angrily: 'Sally's fainted!'"

"Do you remember what happened when we gave this play the first time?" Grace asked giggling like a twelve-year-old.

"Do we?" Mary exclaimed. "Could we ever forget it?"

"What was it?" Janet Arkwright demanded,

with eager curiosity. "Do tell us about it, Miss Livingston."

"We didn't know what to do about clothes, especially for my part," Mary explained. "Abby wasn't so hard to provide for, because hers are not supposed to be immaculate. But Bess Appleby, one of the Specials, offered to borrow her brother's evening clothes for me. Her way of borrowing proved to mean simply taking them, without any formalities of 'May I?' or 'If you please!' It happened to be the evening of Tom Appleby's Fraternity banquet at the University Club, but Bess didn't know it. He ransacked the whole house, accused the butler and footman, and finally learned from one of the maids where his clothes were. He was furious, because by that time it was too late for the banquet."

"Furious! I should say he was!" Belle went on. "When he appeared at the Academy, he and Chesty almost came to blows. Mary found out about it between the acts, so she sent the clothes out to him and finished the play in the worst-looking suit you ever saw. That costume was certainly impromptu! I'm sure that Mr. Thomas Appleby distinctly disapproves of boarding-school dramatics in general, and Fairmount plays in particular."

"I'll warrant he's one young man who could not be hired to sit through the play to-night," Grace

vowed positively, "even if we'd make an exception in his favor."

"Which we won't!" Mary added decisively.

"I wonder if your brother knows him, Grace?" Belle asked suddenly. "He's a Tiger, too, but I don't remember which class."

"Tom Appleby? Oh, yes! He and Hal are boon companions. He is one of the hunting party, I was going to say in the wilds of Long Island, but I'll have to change it to 'on Broadway!' I wrote to mother about that evening clothes joke, and Hal and some of the others got hold of it. Poor Tom thought he'd never hear the last of it. He vows that he will get even some day, Hal says."

"Let him try," Belle said airily; "we're willing. He's sure to fail."

By eight o'clock that evening the great ballroom was crowded, some of the guests even overflowing into the hall and conservatory. It was an early hour for these fashionable folk, but they had made a special effort out of deference to the young actresses. Besides, Mrs. Archer had promised to begin promptly at 8:30, and what that lady promised she generally performed.

There was more than a sprinkling of gray heads among the audience, while the number of bald ones caused such a reflection, Belle said, that it hurt her eyes.

Colonel Arnold was in his glory. There was a

good deal of the boy left in the Colonel, and he strutted about complacently, acting as though the entire entertainment was his own particular property. But then everything connected with Fairmount was dear to his heart, and this opportunity to show the histrionic ability of "our dramatic club" to the world at large, as he grandiloquently expressed it, was not to be neglected. He chose the middle seat of the front row, and was just ushering some friends into the seats next to his own, when they were unblushingly appropriated by a delegation of snowy-haired men, five in all, the most distinguished-looking party in the room. They greeted the Colonel pleasantly, and, at the close of the play, engaged in an animated discussion with him, or he with them, rather.

Mary had worked hard over the play, polishing any dull places and adding one or two touches in honor of the great occasion, so that it was decidedly worth seeing. Having given it before, the Academy girls felt at home in their parts, while Miss Allyn and Miss Arkwright had been thoroughly drilled in their rôles, unimportant though they were, and were duly impressed with their good fortune in being chosen at all.

"We won't give it unless we can give it well," Mary had announced decisively. She was author and stage manager, so her word was law. "Re-

member, this is for real money!" she added, with so much emphasis that Mr. Archer mischievously inquired whether they had accepted counterfeit currency the time before; but they disdained to notice his little shaft.

"We can't fail if we think of the object," Grace said, and they all agreed heartily.

And they did do it so well that the audience recalled then again and again, seeming loath to let them slip back into their everyday characters. It was a very satisfied, very complimentary audience which gathered about the young players afterwards, eager to offer their congratulations upon the success of the evening. Colonel Arnold was among the foremost of these, but the men who sat near him left without even waiting for the cakes and ices which followed the performance. The Colonel informed Grace, when she inquired for them, that he understood they had another engagement.

The girls flocked towards the stairs as soon as the last of the audience had departed, but Mrs. Archer called after them.

"You must be very tired, my dears. Shall I send breakfast up to you to-morrow?"

"Yes, mother," Grace answered meekly, while the rest stared at her in amazement; "we always breakfast in bed at Fairmount. Miss Horton insists on it."

“Tut, tut, daughter!” Her father shook his finger at her warningly, then turned to his wife, smiling in spite of himself. “Don’t forget, dear, that these are fresh young school-girls, not jaded society ladies. I breakfast at eight-thirty sharp, to-morrow. Do I eat alone? Don’t forget that my boy is not here to keep his father company.”

“You’ll not be left alone, Mr. Archer.” It was bashful Beth who spoke. “I’d love to eat with you if I may.”

“So would I!” Belle and Mary echoed.

“We’ll all be down, except mother,” Grace assured him, with a loving hug. “You see what an attractive man you are, Daddy!”

The next day was clear and bright, with enough snap in the air to remind one that winter held the reins, in spite of the sunshine which made the frosty pavements glitter and sparkle as though they had been sprinkled with diamond dust. At breakfast Mr. Archer spoke to them gravely of the real meaning of the day, urging the girls to remember that the celebration of the birthday of the Saviour must underlie all festivities and gift-making, if they wished to get the true Christmas spirit. They respected him even more, if possible, after his gentle little sermon. Just as they were rising from the table, they heard a loud tramping through the hall, and an eager masculine voice saluted them with Christmas greetings.

“ Merry Christmas, all! How are you, father? Any worms for the early birds? ”

“ Depends on what kind of worms these particular early birds are seeking! ”

“ Nice little lady worms,” Hal answered, with his mischievous smile; “ little worms that want to go skating! ”

“ Skating! ” Belle and Mary exclaimed together, in delighted tones.

“ But Hal, surely the ball isn’t up for the Park,” Grace objected. “ The ice is never ready as early as this, or at least they don’t seem to think it is.”

“ It’s pretty cold this morning, Gracie. I don’t think the Park lake is open yet, but there’s the rink. We can have a jolly morning on the ice. I telephoned up to see if they are to be open, so it’s all right.”

The Quartette rushed to get ready, and it was not long before a gay party was on its way to the rink, the skates of the girls clicking musically as they swung side by side with long hockey skates of the young men. The party was reënforced by Janet Arkwright and Miss Allyn. They had helped in the success of the play, and were included in all the succeeding gaieties.

The ice at the rink proved to be in splendid condition, almost too glassy; and the crowd was not as uncomfortable as it would be, later in the

day. Belle, in a charming Russian skating costume of velvet and fur, with a jaunty fur cap, formed a picture which delighted the eyes. She was a splendid skater, in spite of her southern birth. One of the genus known as "camera-fiends" evidently appreciated the picture she made, and was anxious to add it to his collection, but fortunately Hal Archer discovered his intentions in time, and took a wicked pleasure in frustrating them. Belle wondered more than once why he dodged back and forth so often, when a long clear track lay before them; but she said nothing and he did not enlighten her.

It was a very jolly, very hungry party which returned for the Christmas dinner. Mr. Archer was the gayest of them all, and capered about like a school-boy. His good spirits were contagious.

"This is my idea of a dinner," he said emphatically. "Not a French mess in the whole menu. No 'pie a la mince,' just plain mince pie!"

"T. M., you mean," Mary said laughingly.

"T. M.?" he asked. "What is T. M.? I hoped we had a plain American dinner. Please don't spoil it!"

"Don't you know that story, father?" Grace asked incredulously. "Why, it's as old as the hills! The country cook who was very particular marked the top crust of her mince pie T. M. for 'Tis Mince.' Then to be absolutely sure

she marked the other pie T. M., for ' 'Tain't Mince! ' "

Mr. Archer laughed heartily at the rusty old joke. He seemed to be in his element. Once he gave an imitation of Grand Opera as he saw it; he was not an enthusiast, although he loved music. Without warning, he raised his carving knife in truly operatic manner, and sang out in rapidly ascending scale: "A-a-ah! love! will you have white meat or da-ah-ark? "

Grace caught the infection and sang back merrily, in as low a key as possible: "I prefer the white meat, sir!" while Beth astounded her friends by trilling out in silvery soprano: "And I'll take white meat, too! "

For a few moments an unprejudiced observer would have been justified in thinking that he was attending the Christmas feast in an asylum for the mentally unsound. The boys refused to be shut out from the fun, so they added their deep bass voices to the operatic melody. Even Mrs. Archer herself, after a moment of surprised astonishment, rose, with outstretched arms, and warbled: "Welcome, friends! 'tis good to see you eat! " She ended with one of those shakes dear to opera stars, as though the notes had to be dislodged by force. Her imitation was so perfect that it fairly convulsed her hearers. Mr. Archer rose and gravely presented her with a bouquet of large carnations from the

mass which decorated the table. She accepted it with exaggerated smiles and bows, as she once more resumed her seat.

"Do you think that very correct English butler of yours can stand this shock to his nervous system?" Belle whispered to Hal.

"I think he'll survive," Hal answered lightly, in equally subdued tones. "Yes, I'm sure of it! I caught him actually smiling then. Fawncy!"

"Oh! I'm so relieved! Ring up the curtain, then, and let the opera proceed."

Early in the evening the myriad tiny, electric bulbs which were strung through the Christmas tree were lighted, and they all gathered about admiringly. Hal and his friends had trimmed the tree, as the girls had enough on their hands. They had certainly been successful. It was hung with glittering glass ornaments and ropes of shining tinsel, against a background of dark red cranberry chains. Festoons of snowy popcorn swayed between the branches, each branch being tipped with a piece of colored popcorn fastened on with a pin.

Dear old Santa Claus himself dashed in with a jingle of sleigh-bells, although the snow was conspicuous by its absence, and took charge of the tree. He was dressed in his usual manner, red coat with white fur, silvery beard, and fur cap. First he distributed huge snapping-crackers, and the young people formed a ring around the tree

with arms crossed, holding one end of a cracker in each hand. At a given signal they all pulled, and the resulting pop was loud enough to satisfy even the noise-loving college boys.

Lee Carrollton and his friend and Harvey Winton, Chick-a-dee's uncle, appeared just before the tree was lighted. Very little urging was necessary to induce them to join in the fun. They stayed until the end of the evening's frolic, even though they announced more than once that they had "just dropped in!" The rest wondered how Mr. Winton knew of their visit to the city, but Belle refused to commit herself.

All the guests donned the paper caps they found in the crackers. Hal's proved to be an old-fashioned, ruffled sunbonnet with long, floating strings, but he wore it unblushingly for the rest of the evening. It was he who unwrapped Belle's favor for her. A close observer might have noticed a clever bit of sleight-of-hand, but no such observer was near.

"Isn't this a queer coincidence!" he exclaimed, as he handed the favor to her. It proved to be a tiny, red lobster.

"Why?" she asked, with well assumed innocence, but the merriment of the girls betrayed her.

Santa Claus himself distributed the gifts which were heaped beneath the tree, and stacked upon the tables and chairs near by. As he came to

one very large, very flat package, he turned it over and over, searching for the name; but no name was to be found.

"Open it!" was the advice promptly volunteered.

Santa complied and examined the gift itself curiously, still without result.

"It's a picture," he announced in his disguised voice; "a pen and ink sketch of a pretty girl laying her hand on a young man's arm and looking up at him very coquettishly. At least," he corrected himself, "she looks as though she might be pretty, but the picture does not show her face. Let me see — yes, here's the title: 'The Hallway Hold-up!'"

Belle was taken completely off her guard by this unexpected move on the part of the amateur detective. She blushed a rosy red, but tried to cover her confusion by a gay remark to Lee Carrollton. The telltale color did not escape either Hal's eyes or those of Santa Claus, his confederate. The former chuckled audibly, while Santa pretended to scrutinize the back of the picture closely.

"Here's the name!" he announced triumphantly: "Miss Belle Gray! Allow me!" he ended, gallantly presenting the picture.

Belle's eyes flashed as she accepted it.

"Not bad work for an amateur, is it?" Hal whispered significantly.

"I am not up in art, I regret to say," was the dignified response.

"I don't mean that," Hal answered. "I mean for an amateur detective. I'm understudy for Sherlock Holmes!"

"Indeed!" was the freezing reply. Belle had mounted one of her "high horses," as her brothers called it, and was in no mood for raillery.

"Look here, Miss Belle," Hal began later, when, after much manœuvering, he succeeded in cornering her in the library; "you are not really angry, are you?"

There was no answer. Belle stood before the fire in dignified aloofness, gazing into its glowing depths with somber eyes.

"I didn't intend to hurt your feelings; you know that," the young fellow went on earnestly. "I'm sorry, really I am. I've always wanted to meet you — Grace thinks such a lot of you — and now I've offended you. I couldn't resist trying to find out who the girl was who was so complimentary to me, that night in the hall," he confessed boyishly. "Of course I knew it was a case of mistaken identity, and all that sort of thing. You carried it off pretty cleverly, I must say. This picture business was my last hope. The Colonel, Santa Claus, I mean, was as interested as I was. I said I'd find out who the girl was, and I did."

“ And I said I’d burn it,” Belle replied frigidly, “ and I did! ”

“ Phew! ” was Hal’s only comment. He stood in awkward silence for a moment, looking hurt and angry, then started for the door. Just as he reached it, a soft voice stopped him.

“ Wait a moment! ”

Belle could be very winning when she chose, and she did choose, just at that moment. He hesitated expectantly.

“ I did burn — the wrapper, but I’ll keep the picture as a souvenir. ”

“ Of our friendship? ” he asked, returning eagerly, with outstretched hands.

“ Of our friendship! ” she repeated softly.

CHAPTER XXIII

CONFIDENCES

“GRACE! Gracie!! Gracious!!!”

Patience was not Belle's strong point, and the communication she desired to make to her friend was evidently of an urgent nature. She darted into the library, then into the breakfast-room, and finally bounded up the stairs and entered Grace's own room without ceremony. They had been room-mates for so long at Fairmount that the idea of knocking for admission, even in New York, never entered their heads.

Grace looked at her lazily. She was curled up on the cushioned window-seat, crocheting industriously upon a pair of pale blue bedroom slippers. The peaceful task appealed to her, after the round of shopping and gaieties of the last week.

On the day after Christmas the Quartette had accepted an urgent invitation from Mrs. Carrollton and had taken tea with her. Incidentally they had fallen in love with the pretty little Southern woman. Her way of appealing to her tall boy, and of accepting as a matter of course the numerous little attentions he showered upon her,

pleased them all. In the evening they had occupied a box at the Grand Opera, two boxes in fact, for the party was a large one, and had been uplifted by the glorious music of "Aida."

"Did you call, Belle?"

"Did I call! No! I shouted! That poor butler of yours didn't say anything, but he looked the gravest disapproval. I couldn't stop to consider his delicate sensibilities, though, even if he has lived with an English lord. I'm an American lady, and I'm in a hurry, too. If it had been our old butler he'd have said: 'Looky heah, lil' Missy! yore ma don' laik sech a loud noise; an' 'sides yo'-all's a young lady now!' But then old Unc. Remus used to tote me around when I was 'knee high to a grasshopper,' as he says."

Grace laughed. It always amused her to hear Belle quote the darkies who had lived on her father's plantation all their lives.

"May I have a milk-bottle, a quart one, and some beans, please?"

Grace sat straight up in surprise, her work dropping unheeded into her lap.

"A milk-bottle and some beans!" she repeated, her voice sliding up on the last words with comical effect. "Will you have milk in the bottle; and how do you prefer the beans, Boston style?"

"Please don't try to be funny," Belle said impatiently. "I'm in a hurry."

"But, Belle, if you are hungry Mousie will get you something better than milk and beans."

"I'm not hungry, I tell you! I only want the bottle, and I want uncooked beans. If I had not felt sure you'd have them I should have bought them on the way home. Hurry, that's a dear!"

"But what —"

"I'm not conducting an information bureau just now, honey. You must learn to curb that curiosity of yours, Miss Archer! It's — it's for an experiment. Don't ask me anything else, please."

"I suppose it doesn't matter in the least whether I suffer from the 'want to know' fever, does it?" Grace asked in aggrieved tones. "The only really important thing is to do what Miss Gray wants and —"

"Do it now!" finished Belle imperturbably. "That's the idea! You've caught it splendidly. Now if you'll proceed to act upon it with equal celerity, I'll bless you forever. Never mind, there goes Mousie. She'll get them for me. 'Over-the-river,' Gracie."

She dashed off impetuously, leaving Grace to puzzle her fair head over the strange request, without arriving at any solution of the riddle.

"Beans! And a milk-bottle! I give it up. Come in," she added aloud, in response to a vigorous tattoo upon the door which Belle had slammed

in her exit. To her surprise Hal entered, carefully closing the door behind him.

"Look here, Grace," he demanded sharply, "if I tell you something will you promise not to tell?"

"Why, ye—yes," Grace answered hesitatingly. "That is if it's right for me to keep it a secret. Is it something father ought to know, Hal?" There was an anxious note in her voice.

"No, nothing that concerns Dad, but —"

"Oh! then it is something wrong," Grace interrupted sharply. "Is it?"

"You promise?"

"Yes, if you are sure that it doesn't concern father."

"Well, it don't! It concerns you and your friends, though."

"Concerns us? Why, what —"

"I know I ought not to have consented," he broke out impatiently, "but—oh, pshaw! It was just a lark after all. You girls can surely take a joke, can't you?"

"Tell me and see, Buddy," Grace urged, pulling him down beside her, and putting her arm about his neck. The affection between the two was very strong. Even the separation caused by college and academy had not lessened it. While Belle ruled her brothers with an imperious, if loving hand, Grace ruled hers by her gentle sympathy and girlish dependence.

Hal was evidently satisfied that his sister would respect his confidence, for he poured forth his confession, ending with the words: "I know it was wrong, girlie, but we couldn't resist. If it should come out, you'll stand by us, won't you? You're so different from most sisters," he went on artfully. "Some girls nag and scold so, that I wonder their brothers ever speak to them. I tell you, Lady-bug, not many fellows have a sister like mine."

"But some fellows have very charming sisters, nevertheless," Grace said slyly; "especially some southern fellows, named Gray. Don't you agree with me?"

"I think all your friends are charming," he avowed with some heat; "and I've done everything I could to help you entertain them, even to giving up the rest of my trip."

"Ever so good of you!" Grace interrupted mockingly.

"And as for Miss Gray, of course I admire her. She's a beauty, and she's full of fun. Besides, she's your chosen friend. All the same, though, I don't want her to get hold of what I told you just now: she'd rub it in with a vengeance!"

"She would; no doubt about that," Grace agreed. "Belle's a dear, but she doesn't like to be 'taken in' as you call it, nor Mary, either, for that matter. But never mind! Your secret's safe,

because we won't tell them and they can't possibly find it out. It would serve you right, if they did, though," she added severely, fearing she had been too lenient in her reception of his confession.

Hal left the room a few moments later, feeling relieved because he had unburdened his mind. Grace was once more beginning her work upon the bedroom slippers, when she heard a light tap upon her door, and called out hospitably.

"Latch string's on the outside, friend."

"Busy, Grace?"

It was Abby who paused uncertainly upon the threshold of the pretty room, but such a changed Abby that Grace forgot her work, and stared at her friend in surprised admiration. Abby's pale cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining, her usually quiet, controlled manner, was alert and excited.

"What is it? What's happened?" Grace questioned eagerly. "Come in and tell me all about it. I hope you don't want a milk-bottle and beans, and I feel sure you haven't come to confess your sins, like some one else I know. I'm a regular repository this morning. But no half-confidences, remember! I've had one case of that sort to-day, and I've suffered the pangs of curiosity ever since. I must know all," she waved her arms dramatically, "or I withhold my advice. *Comprenez vous ?*"

"I begin to understand why Mme. Archambeau

thinks that girls are chatterboxes," Abby declared laughingly. "She's lived next door to you."

"Come over here on the couch and be comfy," Grace urged, patting the soft cushions invitingly. "Then you can unburden yourself of whatever is agitating you so visibly. Come on!"

Abby obeyed orders to the letter.

"What a beautiful room this is, Grace," she said, as she glanced about appreciatively. "The whole house is beautiful, too, but I've seen so much that is lovely, on this visit, I don't feel as though I could do justice to it. And I owe it all to one dear, thoughtful girl, too."

"Do you really like my room?" Grace asked hurriedly, to evade the praise Abby longed to express. "It is very simple, just white wicker and pale blue draperies."

"I always thought seventeen at Fairmount the daintiest room in the world, but this —" Abby waved her hand about the room to convey her meaning.

It was a beautiful room, charming in its very simplicity. The woodwork was an ivory white; the wicker furniture was finished in the same soft tone, while the draperies were of pale blue. The deep, square bay window in which they were sitting was cushioned in pale blue to match the hangings. Both windows and dressing-table were hung with sheer white swiss, over draperies of the

blue. The rug also carried out the color scheme, while the bath-room adjoining was tiled in blue and white, with towels and bath-mats to match.

Abby noted the harmonious result without a tinge of envy. Grace held a place in her heart that no one could ever usurp. She had come into Abby's life just at the time when the girl was at the turning-point, when every indication pointed to her becoming a pessimist. Since she had learned to take an optimistic view of things, Abby's life had seemed full of richness and beauty.

"Grace made Abby see the doughnut, instead of the hole," Belle explained this change; "and Abby has been enjoying her doughnut ever since."

"I believe you have some weighty news to communicate, Miss Anderson," Grace reminded her. Abby had settled back comfortably and was lost in thought, a pleasing maze, evidently, as she was smiling to herself. "I'm ready to receive secrets, grave or gay. What is it, dear? Something 'instrussing,' as Chick-a-dee used to say?"

"Oh! very instrussing!" Abby answered, with a low laugh. "So interesting and so lovely that I feel like pinching myself to be sure I'm — no, you don't, my lady! If there's any pinching necessary I'll do it myself. Grace," she sobered down suddenly, "she wants me to live with her."

Abby did not mention Mme. Archambeau by name, but Grace failed to notice the omission.

"She does! Oh, Abby! How splendid! You will do it, of course you will! Why, it's a chance that ninety-nine girls out of a hundred would be glad to get."

"I know, but —"

"And you love her already; I can see that. Why do you say 'but?'"

"There's mother, and the children, and my teaching," Abby reminded her. "And even if I felt that I could leave home, I have Miss Horton to consider."

"But I thought you expected to give up your classes at the Academy, before the New Year?"

"I did, at first, but we arranged later for me to stay until the summer vacation; and Mme. Archambeau wants me now."

"I don't think Miss Horton would wish you to lose such an opportunity as this, Abby, do you? And as for your mother, she has other girls to take care of her. You might have had to leave home to teach, you know. I feel sure that your salary, or allowance from Mme. Archambeau, will be more than a teacher's salary; and how much happier you will be!"

"But Miss Horton has done so much for me," Abby said slowly. "I dislike asking her to release me from my promise. Besides —"

"What? more doubts?"

"People might say that — that — oh! you

understand, Gracie. Mme. Archambeau is very rich, and I am very much the reverse. They might think that I am influenced by the thought of her money."

Abby's head went up proudly, and her lips set in a harder line than they had been accustomed to take, of late.

"Don't, Abby, please!" Grace urged, tapping the stubborn lips lightly with her crochet needle. "You look like the 'Freezer' now! Oh, dear! I beg your pardon. I hope I haven't hurt your feelings."

"No, indeed," Abby answered her, with a smile. "I knew that the girls used to call me that. I suppose I deserved it. Do you know, Gracie, that time seems so long ago, yet it's not two years."

"Only a year ago last summer," Grace agreed, "since we were all at Heart's Ease. Now look here, Abby, people whose opinions are worth caring about at all will say: 'There's that clever, young girl putting warmth and brightness into a lonely old lady's life!' And she is lonely in spite of her wealth. Why, Abby, it's a duty, really, because she needs you as much as you need the position, and I congratulate you both. What do you think she called you to father? He answered the telephone, the other day when she wanted you, and she asked him why he was keeping her 'sunshine' away from her."

Abby blushed and laughed, genuinely touched by the old lady's pretty little conceit.

"Are you to be her companion, or her secretary?" Grace asked, as though the question had been definitely settled. "You'd fill either place well."

"She — she says — she doesn't want me for either." Abby's tone was low and tremulous. "She wants me to call her 'grandmother.' You see," she went on, in eager explanation, "she is all alone in the world. Isn't it pitiful? Not a relative anywhere!"

"So you'll have to be them all," Grace nodded approvingly, as she hummed a verse of "Nancy Bell."

"Oh! I am a cook and a captain bold,
And the mate of the Nancy brig,
And a bo'sun tight and a midshipmite,
And the crew of the Captain's gig!"

"Judging from the way she spoils you already, Abby, you'll be captain at any rate, even if you're not all the rest of it. Have you told father yet?"

It never occurred to Grace to ask whether her mother had been informed, but her father — that was a different matter.

"I don't think I have to tell him," Abby answered. "I feel sure he knew about it before I did, from the way he spoke to me the other night. I

didn't understand him, at the time, but it is clear enough now. I must hurry, Grace. She wants me to come in early. It has done me good to talk it over with you."

"Please remember, Abby," Grace said earnestly, "that my advice to you has been truly disinterested, because the madame's gain will be our loss, especially mine."

Abby leaned over and kissed her, then hurried from the room without a word. The unusual caress surprised and touched her friend, for Abby's was not a demonstrative nature.

"This seems to be my busy day," Grace mused, with a smile, as she thoughtfully resumed her work. "Come in!" she added absently, in answer to another knock upon her door. "Is it beans, wickedness, or good fortune, Mistress Mary?"

Mary hesitated in some embarrassment.

"You look like the cat that ate the canary," Grace said teasingly. "You're ashamed because you ate it, but oh! how you did enjoy it! Go on, Miss L., and make your little confession. I'm furnishing everything from beans to sympathy, to-day. What can I do for you?"

"I feel so happy, Grace. I thought I couldn't keep the secret, but I did, didn't I?"

"You certainly did! What is it?"

"You remember that mahogany furniture I bought at the Coolidge auction?"

Grace nodded her sunny head, too eager to hear the rest of the story even to speak.

"Well, that was the beginning of it," Mary informed her, so solemnly that Grace laughed aloud.

"A good, solid beginning, at all events," she said. "Go on!"

"You remember that Miss Horton wouldn't let me use it, or even see it, until it was all paid for? Well, I tell you, Grace, that instalment plan is dreadful. I'll never buy anything as long as I live, unless I can pay for it. Miss Horton says debt is dishonorable and that no girl shall leave Fairmount with the wrong idea about it. She did me more good than she realized, because I grew so tired of paying, paying, paying, that I decided to try to earn some money to hurry matters, and — I — did!"

"You earned it? How?" Grace was interested enough to suit the most exacting story-teller.

"I — guess."

"I can't guess, Mary, you know I can't. I'm not a Yankee. Please tell me."

"I wrote a story."

"Wrote a story?"

"Yes. It was just a short one, but they sent me thirty-five dollars for it. And asked for another, too."

"And you never told us!" Grace's tone was indignant, but her eager excitement evidently

conquered her injured feelings. "I don't see how you could keep from telling it. I'd be so proud I'd write to all my friends. What was the story, Mary?"

"It was something that happened on my trip west, last summer," Mary explained. "There were such jolly people in our car, and two bridal couples. At one of the watering stations on the prairies the two grooms got off to talk to some cow-boys, and — Oh! I can't tell it; you'll have to read it. It's in one of the January magazines." She mentioned the name of the periodical. "I received one by mail this morning."

"I'm just as proud as I can be," Grace said enthusiastically; "reflected glory, you know, Mary; but I'm envious, too, I honestly believe. You have literary talent, and Beth has her lovely voice, and Belle's so clever and handsome, and Abby's like 'sunshine;' but I — I'm just nothing at all."

"Except the sweetest, dearest friend in the whole world," Mary finished earnestly. "Just see what you are always doing for people," as Grace tried to speak. "I don't mean the poor people to whom you give money; I mean the people you help in other ways. Look at Abby! Did one of us think of asking her to join us that summer? Why, we even objected at first, you know we did; and just see how we all love and respect her now! She's

only one of many, so don't ever say again that you are nothing."

"May I tell the others about your story?" Grace's eyes were shining with pleasure. "They will be so pleased."

"Why, yes, it's all right now that it is really published," Mary answered slowly. "Do you know, Grace, I could hardly believe my eyes when that letter came, saying that they had accepted it. Every mail after that I feared that they would send another letter saying they had changed their minds."

"Now I understand why you refused to join us several times, soon after school opened; you were busy with your literary work," she ended grandly.

"Busy! I earned that cheque, every penny of it," Mary said with emphasis. "I wrote that story over and over, and I read it aloud again and again."

"Read it aloud? To whom? Beth?"

"No, to Tinker! He wasn't much of a critic, I must confess, but at least he was better than no audience at all. And you can tell how it sounds so much better when you read it aloud."

"I think you might have confided in us, Mary. Surely we would have been better than Tink!"

"Of course you would, but I had so little hope of succeeding that — I didn't."

"I want to read it right away," Grace declared.
"I'm going to send for a copy."

"I have one for you, Grace. It's in the library. What have you been doing all morning?"

"Sitting here like a spider, and letting little flies walk into my web. Really I'm going to put out a sign. How will this do: 'Consultation hours 9-1. Advice and sympathy furnished, also beans! Come early and avoid the rush!' By the way, what did Belle want with those beans, do you know, Mary?"

"Beans! has she descended from lobster to beans? What is she up to now, I wonder! She sat down-stairs and chuckled to herself every few minutes, in the most aggravating way, but when we asked her what was so amusing, she said: 'Oh, nothing!' Beans!"

"There's luncheon!" Grace exclaimed, as the soft music of the chimes echoed through the hall.
"Where has the morning gone! Doesn't time seem to fly, here in New York? I wish it wouldn't!"

The two girls descended the stairs arm-in-arm, after a short prinking session before Grace's mirror.

"Hal and his friends will be here to-night," Grace announced suddenly. "Mousie invited them to dinner. Hal told her he thought it was shameful the way he and his friends had been slighted during this visit. Poor Mousie feels quite

conscience-stricken about it. She wouldn't if she knew what I know!"

"What, Grace? Please! You are so tantalizing!"

"Can't help it. In my official capacity as consulting confidante, I receive many secrets, but I lock them here." She clasped her hands upon her breast with dramatic fervor.

"Yes, you do," Mary assured her provokingly, "until you forget! I'm going to unlock that secret before this day is over, my lady! You wait and see if I don't!"

"All right, I'll wait," Grace offered serenely. "Come on!"

CHAPTER XXIV

HISTORY FAILS TO REPEAT ITSELF

AFTER luncheon Grace stopped to speak to Mousie, and Beth was feeding Tinker, when Belle beckoned mysteriously to Mary, and darted into the library. Mary followed, wondering what was the matter.

"Promise me you won't tell if I tell you something?" she whispered solemnly, closing the door and locking it.

"I promise!" Mary said promptly. "What is it, Belle? You look as though you had unearthed a dynamite plot."

"I have; not a dynamite plot, but something almost as bad. I've unearthed a traitor!"

"Why, Belle!" Mary's tone showed how shocked she was. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

"Perhaps you will if you look at this!"

She dived down behind the great couch and pulled out a large box.

"But that's private property," objected Mary. "You ought not — that is —"

"It isn't private property either; that's just

the trouble. See! here's the firm's name on the box."

"But how did you happen to discover it, away back there?"

"When I came in, just before lunch, I tossed my muff down on the couch, and my change-purse flew out and dropped behind it. I leaned over to fish for it, and felt something that made me jump and scream. The cover of this box was partly off."

"What was it?"

"Hair!"

"Hair! Hair?"

Belle nodded.

"I was genuinely frightened for a moment. I thought it might be a burglar, waiting until we all went in to lunch. Finally I made up my mind that I'd see. I jerked the couch out suddenly, and found — this!"

Belle solemnly removed the box cover, and held at arm's length a beautiful silvery gray wig, her expression a study in contemptuous disdain.

"This is exhibit A," she continued loftily; "but exhibit B and C and D and E are exactly like it. Now what do you think of that for duplicity!"

"But what —"

"You remember the five men who sat with Colonel Arnold the night of our play?"

Mary nodded thoughtfully.

"The Colonel took possession of the front row so unblushingly, and we all spoke of that party, afterwards; they were such handsome, distinguished-looking old men. Did you find out who they were?"

"Why, no; I believe Mrs. Archer told Grace that she herself didn't know them. The Colonel subscribed for ten or fifteen tickets: he has so many friends."

"Well, I can enlighten Mrs. Archer on the subject," Belle declared grimly.

"But who were they? Surely the Colonel would not bring any people who were — well, not just what they should be." Mary stood up for the old man loyally.

"They may have been what they should be," Belle said decisively, "but they were not where they should be, so there!"

The two girls stared at each other for a moment in silence, as the full enormity of the discovery gradually made itself plain to Mary.

"But Colonel Arnold," she began; "probably they deceived him, too."

"I wish I could think so," Belle said slowly; "but I don't know what to think. He was like a great boy, the night of the play, as full of pranks and mischief as he could be. Those men refused to stay for refreshments, remember. Tom Ap-

pleby vowed he'd get even with us, not because Bess took his evening clothes and he missed the banquet, but because Grace told of it, and the boys teased him unmercifully. I'm almost sure the Colonel was an accomplice. Oh dear! "

"Are you going to tell the others? "

"I don't know. Those boys ought to be made to suffer for such an underhand thing as this; but it is funny, isn't it? " She laughed in spite of herself, but stopped suddenly, and frowned instead. "I suppose they've been hugging themselves ever since, to think how easily we were deceived."

"Let's wait and see how they act at dinner," suggested Mary; "and if they need taking down — "

"We'll do it!" Belle finished promptly, in a severe tone which the twinkling dimples contradicted.

There was quite a flutter that night as the girls dressed for dinner. Mousie had invited not only the Princeton delegation, but Lee Carrollton and his friend, and Lorimer Van Pelt, who had "happened to call" that afternoon, so it was to be quite a function.

"You look like beautiful butterflies," Mr. Archer complimented them gallantly, as the five girls fluttered down-stairs all together. Abby was wearing "Grandmother's" gift, a pale green, silky

crêpe, richly embroidered, and made in the latest fashion. The dainty gown seemed to transform the usually soberly clad girl. She sparkled and chatted in a way which was a revelation to the Quartette.

"My lady next door is to be congratulated on such a handsome addition to her family," Mr. Archer whispered to Abby. "I am rejoiced for you both. I take an interest in all my daughter's friends, especially in the one she respects so highly. I did not interfere with advice, but I hoped that you would make the decision you did."

Abby blushed with pleasure. Mr. Archer was a bluff, good-humored man, at least that was the side he showed to the girls, but his tone to her was so gentle and fatherly that it brought the tears very close.

Mr. and Mrs. Archer were dining out, that night, and going to the opera afterwards. The girls held their breath as the lady swept down the stairs a few moments later, in gleaming white satin, encrusted with golden spangles, wearing her diamond tiara and necklace, and a flight of tiny diamond swallows across her dress, dazzling the eyes with their splendor.

"How beautiful you look, mamma," Grace whispered softly. She refrained from kissing her mother, however, fearing to crumple so much gorgeousness. She did not have the same regard

for her father's immaculate evening attire, or else his wide-opened arms were invitation enough to disregard it, for she threw herself into them, and was hugged lovingly.

"Have a good time, butterflies," he called back heartily. "I only wish I were to be here to help you instead of going to that puppet-show! Good-by!"

"Father detests Grand Opera," Grace explained. "It's queer, too, when he's so fond of music. He thinks opera is too unlikelike. He said that if a man came up to him on Wall Street and began to warble about stocks, he'd have him sent to Bellevue. Mother gets so impatient when he makes fun of the singers. He often does it just to tease her. She doesn't care for music as much as he does, but she never misses the big nights at the Metropolitan. Come on; Hal and the boys are in the drawing-room, waiting for us."

As they entered the room they found the young men, eight of them, seated in a long row, all reading, and all too deeply engrossed even to notice their entrance. Strange to say, the eight magazines were exactly alike. Mary flushed when she caught a glimpse of the cover. For a moment, the boys read on, apparently oblivious to everything but their stories, until Hal happened to glance up. Then he jumped to his feet in well assumed astonishment.

"Oh! good evening! When did you come in? I was so interested in my story I fear I was deaf to all else. Splendid number, this month; best stories I ever read."

"There's one in particular," Tom Appleby supplemented, "that appealed to me, because —"

"Oh, yes! that 'Limited' story," Lee Carrollton interrupted. "Fine bit of work, that story, fine! That author has a future before him unless he's already well-known."

Mary blushed and laughed, but she was sensible enough to take this bit of boyish mischief in the right spirit. Besides, she knew she held a chastening rod over five, at least, of the culprits, for use later, if necessary.

"Yes, sir," Hal went on; "that story is true to life. It's well worked up, too. Let me see, was it Mrs. Deland, or —"

"Don't pay any attention to them, Mary," Grace advised, laughing in spite of herself. "Do as Hal used to do when he was a small boy. If he had been naughty — a very rare occurrence, of course: knowing the finished product it is unnecessary to state that! — and father spoke to mother about punishment, Hal would pretend to be utterly unconscious; but as soon as they finished he would march to the door in the most dignified way, and say, just before he left: 'I payin' no 'tentions to you!' So you must pay no ' 'tentions' to these

silly creatures. They'd be only too delighted to be in your place, wouldn't you, boys? "

"Wouldn't we? We certainly would!" Lorimer Van Pelt answered earnestly, with outstretched hand.

"We congratulate you, Miss Mary," Hal added, while the rest gathered around, and for a few moments Mary was kept busy returning the vigorous boyish hand-clasps.

"My one literary success, if it could be called success," Hal began, laughing at the remembrance, "was the report of a fire I sent in to one of the Princeton papers. It was handled splendidly, that report, well worked up, striking climax, and all that sort of thing. I even squeezed in a bit of pathos at the end, which brought tears to my own eyes. I waited outside that newspaper office for two hours, the next morning, in the cold gray dawn, to secure the first copy. My! but it was dreary, and I was hungry enough to eat the newspaper itself.

"When the first papers came out, I snatched one from a boy and tossed him a dime. Hurrying to the nearest lamp-post, I searched the first page for my head-lines: surely no other page was worthy of such a masterpiece! The first page proved a barren waste, but I was not discouraged, as naturally the news of the world would take precedence, so I searched the second, the third, the fourth.

Finally, tucked in at the bottom of a column on the fifth page, I found this:

“ ‘ A small fire in Austin’s drug store, late last night, caused damages to the extent of five hundred dollars.’ ”

“ That was my first and last literary effort, Miss Mary. Joking aside, that story of yours is a dandy, and we’re all proud of you. It means a great deal for a beginner to get into a magazine like this.”

“ But how did you find it out? ” Mary questioned wonderingly.

“ Saw a copy on Grace’s table, and Tom chased over to a news-stand for the rest of them. You ought to feel greatly encouraged over such a good beginning. It is a first attempt, isn’t it? ”

“ Yes, except for little plays I’ve done for the Fairmount Dramatic Club.” Mary’s eyes were shining; already her work meant much to her. “ But none of those were really original, you know. Belle calls them ‘ hash!’ ”

By this time they were seated at the table, with Mousie presiding, enjoying the gay chatter as much as the young people did.

“ Where’s the mater? ” Hal demanded, looking about disappointedly.

“ She’s dining out, and going to the opera,” Mousie informed him. “ She is sorry she could not be with you.”

Hal muttered something about a fellow liking to get acquainted with his own mother once in a while, but looked ashamed of himself as he caught his sister's eyes fixed upon him in grieved surprise. Even implied criticism of her mother pained the loyal daughter. Hal realized this, and hastily changed the subject.

"That was a fine play of yours," he began, turning to Mary. "How much did you clear?"

"We don't know exactly, but there were about one hundred and twenty-five tickets sold, and hardly anything in the way of expenses. Mrs. Archer says we did splendidly, in a financial way, I mean," she modified her enthusiastic statement hurriedly.

"And in an artistic way, too," he assured her. "Nothing of the usual raggedness of amateur work about that performance. It —"

"Hal! say, Hal!" one of his friends cut in sharply. "Have we an engagement for Friday?"

"No — yes — I don't know," Hal answered, impatient at the interruption. "You see, Miss Mary," he went on, "the way you bring that snobbish old family to terms is —"

"Hal!" another young fellow put in, trying to catch his friend's eye. "If we intend to get to the shack to-night, we must start pretty early."

"I'm not going up to the shack to-night, Jim," Hal answered shortly. "We decided to devote

this evening to the girls. As I was saying," turning again to Mary, who was thoroughly enjoying the little comedy, "about the play — that hero of yours would have been a regular cad if — "

"Which play are you speaking of, Archer?" Tom Appleby inquired pointedly, while Grace's face flushed an uncomfortable red.

"Why, the one the girls gave here," he answered innocently. "That is — by George!" he stopped suddenly; "perhaps we ought to go up to the shack to-night, after all. We can make it, in the machine, in an hour and a half. What do you think, fellows?"

"I think we ought to have gone some time ago," Tom muttered gruffly.

"I — I wonder if we'll have snow," Hal hazarded desperately, at a loss for a subject.

The rest of the boys greeted his original remark with a shout of laughter.

"No, but we'll have a landslide pretty soon," Tom answered in a significant whisper.

Belle overheard the speech, low as it was. She glanced at Mary, and nodded her head.

"I suppose Grace told you the plot of the play?" she asked Hal. "You seem to know it pretty thoroughly."

"Why — er — ye — that is — " he floundered hopelessly, but managed to make a finish. "Grace

thought it a very good plot, very good, indeed."

"By the way, speaking of the play," Mary went on, "who were the men next to Colonel Arnold, that night? They were in his party, I believe. Does any one know? They were decidedly handsome and distinguished looking: just my idea of real gentlemen."

Five of the masculine guests glanced at each other uncomfortably, but said nothing.

"They seemed to enjoy the play so much," Belle said brightly. "Did you know them, Gracie?"

"I — I don't —" stammered Grace in embarrassment, wishing fervently that the question had come before her interview with her brother, that morning.

"The reason I ask," Belle went on gravely, although the dimples were struggling to put in an appearance, "is because I found something belonging to one of them that he will miss very much."

Several manly hands involuntarily sought as many pockets for a hurried inventory of its owner's possessions.

"Was it valuable?" Tom Appleby asked anxiously.

"Yes, indeed, very!" Belle answered emphatically. "In fact, I am surprised that the owner has not discovered his loss before this, because —"

She was interrupted by the sound of voices in the hall, and a moment later Colonel Arnold himself put his head in at the door, with the plaintive query: "Room for just one more?"

There followed a laughing hubbub of greeting from the young people, and an urgent invitation from Mousie to join the party. The Colonel had dined, but was not averse to another round of dessert.

"Do you believe, Colonel Arnold," Belle began impressively, "that history repeats itself?"

There was an involuntary sigh of relief from several members of the party; any subject was welcome to them just then, rather than the one the Colonel's opportune entrance had side-tracked.

"Why, I don't know, Miss Belle," the Colonel replied slowly. "Really, I don't believe I've ever given any thought to the matter."

"But we have, haven't we, Mary?" Belle persisted; "especially of late. Don't you suppose there could be another George Washington, for instance, or another Arnold?"

"Arnold?"

"Yes, Benedict Arnold, the traitor, you know — the man who betrayed his trust."

The Colonel seemed to have some difficulty in swallowing just then. He choked badly, but instead of sympathy, the younger men found his predicament highly amusing.

"Did a crumb go down your Sunday throat, Colonel?" Hal jeered, teasingly. "Miss Gray's very original idea of reincarnation, or repetition doesn't appeal to me, does it to you?"

"By the way, Belle," Mary interrupted eagerly, "what will you do with your find? If it is valuable—you said it was, you remember—you really ought to search for the owner, or can you use it yourself?"

Several boys awaited the answer anxiously. That it took them by surprise was evident.

"Not being an Indian," Belle replied concisely, "I can't. I'm not collecting scalps."

An involuntary "Oh!" was distinctly audible. Hal stared at Belle in comical dismay.

"I told you you'd do something careless," Tom Appleby muttered accusingly.

"I'm afraid the secret's out, boys," the Colonel said, shaking his head gravely. "You'll have to take your medicine."

"But what about their accomplice, Colonel?" Belle asked reproachfully. "We don't expect too much of just college boys" (the "just college boys" winced at her tone), "but you!"

"Don't blame Colonel Arnold, Miss Belle." Tom spoke in manly tones, although his face was uncomfortably flushed. "He knew nothing about it. In fact he only recognized us after the play was over, and then he wasn't satisfied with sending us

away hungry, but he even called the next day and presented us with a liberal piece of his mind, didn't you, Colonel?"

"I endeavored to make clear to you the error of your ways," the Colonel answered promptly, "but I fear my efforts were not crowned with success."

"I'm so glad you were not in it!" Belle's tone showed her relief. She tried to look very severe, but a glance at the faces of the young culprits was too much for her. She smiled, then forgot altogether the dignified reserve with which she had intended to treat the affair, and joined in the general merriment as heartily as the others. Evidently Lee and his friend, and Lorimer Van Pelt had been taken into the secret. Only Mousie remained unmoved, looking from one to another in astonished wonder, until Mary explained it to her.

"It's those men who came to our play — the ones who sat next to the Colonel, Mousie. We feel so sorry for them, and so afraid they'll take cold, because we found their scalps behind the couch in the library."

"The dickens you did!" Hal exclaimed. "So that's how you found it out? I thought I returned those wigs the next day. Anyhow," he added daringly, "it was worth the risk for such a dandy performance, wasn't it, boys?"

The others agreed so heartily that the girls felt their anger over the deception melting before the warmth of the praises.

"You certainly made fine-looking old men," Mary declared graciously, but modified her statement by adding: "Strange, too, considering!"

"You have shattered my theory, Colonel," Belle declared mischievously. "But I'm delighted to have it shattered."

"What theory?"

"Why, that history repeats itself."

"I'm glad I have, because I should not care to have the punishment repeated. I shouldn't enjoy being ostracized; I find my present company very much to my taste," he assured them in his courtliest manner. "Put yourself in my place, please, young ladies, before you sit in judgment on my leniency towards the culprits. There were five young men from my own Alma Mater, pleading, with tears in their manly eyes —"

"Oh! say now, Colonel!" the owners of those manly eyes objected.

"—to be forgiven for their ruse. They said they could not bear to be shut away from such an unusual treat. They told me of a solemn vow registered by one of their number, to avenge a grievous wrong to himself—a wrong which not only robbed him of a Fraternity banquet, and I assure you, girls, those banquets are—well, not

slow! — but also exposed him to the jeers and jibes of certain merciless companions. And all caused by this very play! To them it seemed but poetic justice that the play should pay the forfeit. I'm ready to do penance, however; I was accessory after the fact! and, too, I forgave them! What form shall it take; red-hot ploughshares or — " he paused suggestively.

"Or what?" Belle questioned laughingly. "The ploughshares wouldn't do us much good."

"Or a theater-party?" he ended slowly.

There was no doubt about the choice; it was unanimous. The Colonel looked questioningly at Mousie, who nodded her head and smiled.

"Mrs. Archer decided against any dances, or affairs of that sort for the girls," she explained quietly, "but I know she will not object to the theater."

"Good!" the Colonel answered. "Excuse me, please, while I telephone to see what we can get. Any choice, young friends? This is holiday season, remember, so we may expect the theaters to be pretty crowded."

"We'll like whatever you get," Beth assured him shyly.

"And we'll all have to be excused," Grace added. "It's not early, remember. You will go, too, Mousie, won't you?"

"Of course Miss Munsing will go," the Colonel

called back authoritatively. "Don't imagine for an instant that I can take the responsibility of all this crowd alone! My doctor would be horrified!"

"But you brought it on yourself," Beth reminded him laughingly, as he returned to announce that he had secured seats at the New Theater, to see "Twelfth Night." "I, for one, am glad you found them out, and forgave them, if this is the result!"

CHAPTER XXV

LETTERS AND PACKAGES AND A CALLER

"ONE for Mary, and two for you, Beth," Grace said, sorting the mail the butler handed to her as she left the breakfast room, the next morning. "Three for Belle; no, here's another! That handwriting looks familiar," she remarked, as she laid a pile of mail upon her mother's desk, then proceeded to examine the letter in question, curiously. "Don't you recognize it, Mary?"

She was actually passing it over for Mary's inspection when its owner interfered by taking forcible possession of it.

"There are disadvantages in rooming for years with one person," Belle remarked casually, "especially if that person chances to be of an inquisitive turn of mind. Don't you know that it's a criminal offense to withhold Uncle Sam's mail? You have much to learn, Miss Archer."

"But I can't remember whose writing it is," Grace persisted, so innocently that even Belle was forced to join in the laugh. "It's very familiar, but I can't place it, yet I know I have seen it often."

Belle leisurely opened the letter under discussion.

"Oh, jolly!" she exclaimed in a pleased fashion. "You-all will —" then she caught herself up abruptly, and read on, her face wreathed in smiles. It was a long letter, several pages, and it seemed doubly long to the impatient watchers. They gazed at Belle eagerly, anxious to hear what had called forth that pleased exclamation. The unfinished "You-all will —" was very tantalizing.

Belle was well aware of their eagerness, but with beautifully simulated indifference she folded her letter slowly, and replaced it in its envelope, then began to read the rest of her mail with provoking deliberation. When this performance was finished, she once more opened the first letter, written on dainty, cream note-paper with a tiny raised monogram on the envelope's flap, and carefully re-read it.

"Well?" Grace questioned sharply.

"It must be written in Sanscrit," Mary remarked to Beth in a sarcastic undertone; "any other language would surely have been deciphered long ago. I could have read the inscription on the obelisk in Central Park, before this. My letters are from father, and from a cousin in California," she added aloud, for the general information. "Did you hear from home, Belle?"

"Oh, yes," Belle answered carelessly: "one from mother, one from father, and a 'collaboration' from my brothers."

She was perfectly aware of the state of their feelings, and enjoyed their thinly veiled curiosity.

"I thought you received four," Grace said insinuatingly.

"So I did, honey, four lovely letters. One of them was especially interesting; but then weddings are always interesting, don't you think so? Come over here, Tinkery-winkery, and talk to its Auntie Belle!"

"Stay where you are, Tinker." Beth promptly arrested the small dog's progress by seizing the first part of him available. It happened to be his abbreviated tail, and he deeply resented it. "There! there! Tink! Missus wouldn't hurt this little doggie for the world; no, she wouldn't! But she wants Auntie Belle to talk to us! What wedding, Belle? Whose? When? Where?"

"Didn't you get any letters at all?" Belle inquired with great solicitude. "I'm sure I don't ask to see your correspondence, but you all seem deeply interested in mine. I don't understand it, really I don't!"

"Isn't she provoking?" Grace inquired of no one in particular. "If I didn't like her so well I'd dislike her intensely. When anyone 'oh's' and 'ah's' over a letter, and smiles like a Cheshire cat

when she reads it for the third time, it must be very interesting."

"It is," Belle agreed drily. "As I said before, weddings always are. I hope to have one of my own, some day. I'll invite you all," she ended generously.

"Counting chickens!" Mary sang out mockingly, then dropped the subject and picked up the morning paper. The others took the hint, and immediately became engrossed in book or magazine. Belle looked about and chuckled, but as the reading continued, she fidgeted uneasily.

"Some one's going to be married!" she vouchsafed at last.

No answer beyond an indefinite murmur. The heads bent in closer absorption over their books, although Grace discovered, later, that her magazine was upside down.

"I'm invited to the wedding," Belle went on complacently.

She waited to observe the effect of her news, but there was nothing to observe. This was more than she had bargained for.

"It's to be the day before New Year's," was the next bit of information volunteered.

"Hm!" sounded an absorbed comment from Mary.

"It's to be on Staten Island!" came item number four.

No faintest sign followed this announcement: as far as visible interest was concerned she might have been addressing an audience of deaf-mutes.

"I think I'll go tell my news to the wax figures at the Eden Musée," she flashed out sharply, irritated by this continued display of indifference. "They look intelligent, at least. Probably they are as bright as some people I know."

With this gentle fling she started to leave the room, but paused on the threshold in genuine exasperation, and delivered a parting shot.

"You're all invited, too!"

With that she slammed the door and sped up the stairs.

That last shot told. The girls flew after her and captured her before she succeeded in locking both the doors of her room. Then they placed her forcibly in a chair, and held her there, while Mary brandished a glass of water threateningly over her head.

"It is to speak!" she ordered sternly.

"All right! I will! But do be careful, Mary! I don't want to do my hair all over again."

"Then hurry and relieve our curiosity or —" a gesture finished the threat.

"It's from Miss Townsend," Belle began hastily. "The Captain is to go west for several months, so they are to be married immediately. Millie is to be maid-of-honor, and she wants us to be

bridesmaids. She says she's sorry — wait! I'll read you the letter."

"At last I see a glimmer of reason," Grace remarked in relieved tones. "There is hope for the patient, Doctor Livingston. The water cure always works!"

Belle opened her letter with exasperating care which made the rest long to pinch her, or do something to hurry her. After she had painstakingly smoothed out the creases in the paper, she began to read:

"DEAR GIRLS: — I am addressing this to Belle, but it is for you all."

("You sinner!" Mary whispered.)

"I feel that you have all been interested in my little romance, and I know, too, that the estrangement between the Captain and myself might never have been cleared away had it not been for your kindly offices. Now please do not jump to conclusions. The dear man has not betrayed your confidence. At this moment he has not the faintest idea that I have discovered his secret; but a question here and there, and one or two remarks on his part have led me to a reasonable solution. If further proof were lacking, his request would be enough; for it was he who suggested that I invite the Quartette to the wedding. I pretended to be surprised, and asked: 'Why?' It was comi-

cal to see him flush and hesitate, and offer a halting explanation which failed to explain. Finally he said, oh! so earnestly! 'Because they are true friends of yours, truer than you realize; and for downright common sense, commend me to those girls! ' "

("Those girls " interrupted the reading to dance a little jig of jubilation.)

"Aside from the Captain's request it will give me great pleasure, on this happiest day of my life, to have you with me. I wish I could have given you longer notice, but the date was decided very suddenly. My trousseau is being rushed with all possible speed. Millie has decided to wear pale blue, so if you will wear white, with large white hats, it will be all right. The 'Quartette' dresses you planned for the holidays will be just the thing. It is fortunate that they are all alike.

"The Captain has ordered the bridesmaids' bouquets of white sweet peas. You see we are taking your acceptance very much for granted. I am sorry I cannot ask Abby, but it would make an uneven number, and I know, too, that she cares very little about such things. Besides, the Captain has invited five of his brother officers from West Point, to be ushers. Be sure to have her come with you, though. I shall be disappointed if she is not one of the guests.

"I begin to realize that I am actually entering

‘the Service.’ We are to have a military wedding, with groom and ushers in full uniform; also many guests, as the Captain’s brother officers are expected, and some of his military friends from Fort Wadsworth, near by.

“At first it seemed impossible to arrange for the ceremony so hurriedly. I felt, too, that I owed a certain duty to Miss Horton which prevented me from giving up my classes on such short notice; but fortunately one of my class at college has just resigned her position in a western school because she expects to live in New York, so Miss Horton has engaged her in my place. I know you will like her and she will like you. Other reasons there were, but the Captain met and conquered each one, with the result that the New Year will see the beginning of my new life.

“Let me hear from you at once, but be sure the answer is ‘yes!’ I have written at length because I wished to explain it all to you, but you may telephone your answer; it will expedite matters. I do not care to fill your places, though, even if I could do so at this late hour, so do not refuse!

“With love,

“WINIFRED TOWNSEND.”

“Refuse?” Mary repeated in astonishment. “Refuse! Does she think we are crazy? Refuse to be bridesmaids, and wear our ‘Quartet’

dresses, and have escorts in uniform? The last 'em alone would be inducement enough for me!" she added frankly. "Besides, it's Miss Townsend!"

"Oh, dear!" Beth sighed soberly. "How strange Fairmount will seem without her. I suppose her friend will be all right, but she won't be Miss Townsend."

"Neither will Miss Townsend herself, after the holidays," Grace explained. "She'll be Mrs. Moffatt!"

Mr. and Mrs. Archer had also received invitations to the wedding, so it was arranged for the party to go over to Staten Island in two sections, the bridesmaids in one motor, Abby and Mr. and Mrs. Archer in the other.

The gowns to which Miss Townsend referred were the result of one of Belle's brilliant inspirations.

"Let's get dresses exactly alike for once," she urged enthusiastically. "We won't wear them until we reach New York. Oh! I know just what you are going to say," she added, as Mary tried to speak. "You are a regular objector! I like yellow, and Grace likes blue, and Beth adores *écru*, and you prefer pink; but we all look well in white, so we'll decide on that."

And white they were — dainty, filmy white — just the gowns to delight any girlish heart, be its

owner blonde or brunette, a Titian red, or a "nut brown" maid.

"Now you see how clever I was!" Belle congratulated herself complacently, when the wedding was under discussion. "We couldn't have been bridesmaids if it had not been for my idea, and my firmness in carrying it out. Whoever heard of bridesmaids not dressing alike? 'Go 'way, honey-gal! dat am too 'dicerlous to conterplate!' Mammy's right; it is! But now, thanks to Miss Belle Gray, we sail along in that bridal procession in all our glory."

She started to hum the Wedding March from "Lohengrin: "

"Dum, dum, de dum!

Dum, dum, de dum!

Dum, dum, de dum, dum, de dum, dum, de dum!"

and soon all four were marching solemnly about the room and down the hall, to its inspiring strains.

After some of their exuberance had been worked off, they set themselves seriously to taking an account of stock, and decided to go shopping at once for the white hats and new white gloves to complete their costumes. The result of the expedition was all that could have been desired. Even Mrs. Archer, the critical, pronounced the large white net picture hats, each with a drooping white plume, the finishing touch to the dainty dresses.

They had very little time to decide upon their gift to the bride, but gradually the argument narrowed down to "something" in cut glass, or "something" in silver, jewelry having been left out of the discussion because Miss Townsend seemed to care so little for it.

"But cut glass breaks," Beth reminded them wisely, "and then she'll have no remembrance of her bridesmaids. If we choose silver — well, that's always serviceable."

So silver triumphed, and they spent a busy hour at Tiffany's trying to make up four uncertain minds. As soon as they made a choice from the beautiful things about them, something else occurred to their minds, or was pressed upon their notice by an obsequious attendant. And after all they went back to their very first selection, a handsome silver coffee percolator and tray, with cream pitcher and sugar bowl to match.

"I know something she wants very much," Beth remarked, after they had arranged for the card to accompany the gift, and had summoned one of the members of the firm, to impress upon him the importance of delivering that particular purchase in time, no matter what other business of the firm was delayed.

"Why, Beth," Mary said reprovingly, "you know it's too late now."

"No, no! I mean from me, personally," Beth

explained. "It's just an inexpensive gift, at least I think it is; and I know she wants it because she said so. If you don't mind I'd like to get it for her."

"Now isn't that strange?" Grace asked soberly. "I was thinking of something she wants very much, myself, just at that moment. That's mental telepathy! Why can't we each send her some little personal remembrance, and let the percolator be the Quartette's gift?"

This plan was agreed upon, and the next day four mysterious purchases were made, three of which were promptly dispatched to their destination; but the fourth, Beth's choice, was late in arriving, so it had the honor of going over with the wedding party.

The day before the wedding was a busy one. When the girls reached home, late in the afternoon, they were told that a very young man had presented himself three different times, demanding to see Miss Belle Gray.

"Who can it be, Belle?" Grace asked curiously. "Didn't he leave his name? Is it some Eustis boy?"

"No," Belle replied, trying not to smile. "He had no card, but he gave the butler his name. It was Maginnis, Patrick Maginnis!"

"Oh, Belle! no!"

"Oh, Grace! yes!"

“ But what did he want? Who is he? ”

“ He’s a resident of the East Side, a region both populous and popular, my child,” Belle answered calmly. “ He wanted news! I forgot all about the poor youngster.”

“ News? Look here, Belle, you are worse than an oyster. What news? ” Grace was really impatient.

“ News of our business venture. Paddy and I made an investment together; we’re partners, as it were, but the cash was mine, so it all stands in my name. I’m sorry I can’t relieve his poor little mind. I’m afraid our ‘ deal ’ is off. No news, in this case, is not good news. That’s all I can say for the present.” She turned away with a laugh.

Just then the butler handed a tiny package to Beth, and informed her that he had receipted for it. She opened it eagerly, thinking that it was a belated gift, but gave an exclamation of genuine delight as she lifted the cotton with which the box was lined, and saw its contents.

“ Let’s see, Beth! ” urged Mary, peeping in, inquisitively. “ A ring! but it looks like — ”

“ It doesn’t look like, it *is* mine! Oh! I’m so glad! I did so hate to lose it.”

“ But you didn’t say a word about your loss,” Grace exclaimed in surprise. “ I thought you wore that ring the first night you were here. I am almost

sure of it, because I remember thinking how pretty it looked."

"So I did. It disappeared the day we had the sewing-party. I searched everywhere, but I couldn't find it."

"Why didn't you speak to me, or to Mousie?" Grace asked. "We could have helped you look for it. But I don't understand how you are receiving it by express if you lost it here!"

Beth handed her a note which had been folded into the box beneath the ring. It was from Miss Horton.

"DEAR BETH" (it ran):—"I know that you will be surprised to receive the enclosed ring. Were you aware of its loss? A man from the Hollow brought it up to the Academy, this morning. He is the father of two of the Day Nursery children. He tells me that he noticed his little girl playing with the ring, but she said it was her dolly's bracelet, and showed him where she had found it. The child cried so bitterly that he let her keep it thinking it was only a doll's ornament. But that night he happened to see it in the light, and suspected that the stone was not glass as he at first supposed. He seems to have had quite a struggle before he brought the ring to me. He is very poor, and he knew that if his suspicions were correct, it would bring in quite a sum of

money; but, on the other hand, he realized that the 'yoong leddies,' had been very kind to his children.

"I recognized the ring at once, and thanked him for you. I hasten to send it, to relieve your anxiety.

"With love to all,
"HARRIET HORTON."

"Isn't that the strangest thing?" Mary said gravely. "I'm so glad the man was honest."

"So am I," Beth agreed. "I shall send him a cheque, too. You know how dearly I love this ring. I remember it all so clearly now, yet it never occurred to me when I was turning the dresser drawers upside down, and going over and over the contents of my trunk. When we were sewing for the dolls, I said that I was almost sorry we had decided upon baby dresses, because I'd like to make mine a summer girl. Just for fun I puffed the sleeve up to the shoulder and pushed my ring on, as a bracelet. I had one of the tiny ones, you know. I think some one called to me, just then, because I remember laying Miss Dolly aside and leaving the room. I suppose the sleeve slipped down again, and hid the ring. I'm so relieved. I can't tell you how sorry I felt about it. It was mother's first gift."

Once more they started up-stairs to remove their

wraps, but once more they were detained, this time by an excited boyish voice.

"I tell ye she tol' me to come here, ye ol' duffer! She tol' me to! This yere's the card she guv me. Jist go an' ast her if ye think 'tain't so!"

"It's all right," Belle assured the butler, smiling at his perturbation. "Come in, Paddy. There's no news, I'm sorry to say, but —"

"Shure an' there is!" the eager youngster contradicted, with a wide smile of sheer delight.

His thin little face showed marks of a hurried scrubbing. It had been a thorough scrubbing as far as it went, but its area terminated so abruptly that the contrast with the "great unwashed" beyond was painfully evident. The lad was so excited that he hopped up and down, and his words fairly tumbled over each other.

"It's came! it's came! I rode up in th' waggin wid it! Shure I did!"

"Why, Paddy —"

"Oh! youse won it all right, all right! I knowed youse would! It's down-stairs, miss."

"But I —" Belle tried to say something, when the boy's face clouded over, and his voice choked pitifully.

"Y'ain't changed yer mind, hev ye? Oh! y' promised, y' promised sollum! The fellers said they knowed 'twas jist a bluff. They said as how nobody gives away things fer nothin'. But I tol'

'em y' promised, an' y' looked like th' real thing! Y' ain't goin' back on it, are ye? "

The boy's emotion overcame him, and he wiped his eyes upon a coat sleeve whose shining smoothness indicated that it had been used for a similar purpose, on previous occasions. The girls stared from Belle to the boy, and back again to Belle, without in the least understanding what it was all about.

"Look here, Paddy," Belle began sternly, "did I say I'd give it to you if I won it, or did I not? "

"Y' did say it!" he sniffed anxiously.

"Then don't you know it's all right? People who are honorable," Belle laid great stress upon the word, "do not break their promises."

"N—no, ma'am! "

"Are you sure we've won it? "

"Shure! I rode here in th' waggin. The guy down-stairs put it in the hall 'til youse got home."

"Come on, then, Paddy," Belle took his grimy little hand in hers, and started for the basement, the rest trailing along silently. As they reached the foot of the stairs the boy gave an exclamation of joy, and letting go of the guiding hand, sprang over to a shining object which leaned against the wall near the servants' entrance.

"Ain't it a beaut!" he exclaimed, as he knelt before it, wild with joy. "Ain't it a beaut!"

The girls felt the tears very near their eyes. Such adoration, such delight, made them forget completely the boy's rough clothes, and uncouth language. They saw only the thin little face shining with purest joy.

"It certainly is a beauty!" Belle said with some difficulty. "It's even handsomer than I thought. I'm so glad we won it!"

"It" was a bicycle of up-to-date make, with handsome nickeled trimmings, coaster-brake, horn, and tool-kit all complete. An examination of the latter disclosed the necessary tools, including a puncture-set, hand-pump, wrench and oil-can. The boy was speechless as he handled the things with loving touch, while the girls stood by and enjoyed his pleasure.

"I — I guess I'll go now," he said finally, with a satisfied sigh. Even at the last he seemed to fear some accident which would rob him of his coveted treasure.

"Are you sure you can get it home all right?" Belle asked. "I'd hate to have any one take it away from you."

"Take ut away? Take *my* wheel?" The boy squared off belligerently, fairly bristling at the suggestion. "I'd like ter see 'em do ut!"

Mr. Paddy Maginnis and his wheel were escorted to the lower door, after a grave handshake from each of the girls. Just as he left, he whispered

softly to Belle: "Send 'em away, can't ye? I want ter say somethin' to ye."

Belle did as he requested, and as soon as the two were alone, the boy stammered shyly: "I'd like ter — ter kiss ye, ef I — ef youse — ye see I never thought I'd git one."

"Of course I'm willing," Belle said gently. "Good-by, Paddy! Have a good time with your wheel, and don't forget me, will you?"

"Never!" he answered emphatically.

"Don't say one word," Belle implored, when she joined the others up-stairs, her face flushed and her eyes suspiciously red. "I'll tell you all there is to tell.

"I was standing in front of a big grocery window one morning — the day I asked you for the beans, Grace. There was a fringe of small boys around the window, four or five deep. That was what first attracted me. In the window was the wheel, with a milk-bottle, partly filled with beans, in front of it, and a card saying that the one who made the best guess at the number of beans in the bottle would get the wheel. Of course there was the usual condition; each guess had to be accompanied by a tag from some sort of soap, and the tags cost twenty-five cents each!

"The youngster you saw was looking at the bicycle with his heart in his eyes. When I spoke to him he didn't even hear me, at first, but after-

wards he talked to me. He was so eager, and had no money even for one chance, so I promised to try for him. It was the last day of the contest, so I had no time to waste. I measured the beans and counted them again and again. I put in six guesses altogether. Paddy will be the envy of his neighborhood, with that wheel! It was cheap at the price — the laddie's joy, wasn't it?" Belle tried to speak lightly, but failed. As for the rest — they never even answered!

CHAPTER XXVI

“OUR WEDDING”

THE wedding was set for four o'clock on New Year's eve, so the bridesmaids decided to dress before the early lunch, and start immediately after it. Hal Archer unexpectedly appeared at the house on the morning of the eventful day, bringing the other Princetonians in his train, as usual. By a singular coincidence, Lee Carrollton also “dropped in;” but then the holidays were almost over, so they wished to make the most of them. There followed a gay little dress-parade for the boys' especial benefit.

“Humph!” Hal addressed Grace in resentful tones, “your Miss Townsend knows that you have a brother, doesn't she? Why didn't she ask me to be usher?”

“And she knows your brother has a chum, doesn't she?” Tom Appleby mimicked teasingly. “Why didn't she ask me to be usher?”

“I tell you what, fellows,” Lee declared gravely, “we're simply not in it with those military dandies. We might as well acknowledge it.”

“Wouldn't you rather have us than those offi-

cers?" Hal asked Belle, expecting to receive a decided affirmative.

"Why, we — we —" Belle hesitated, and blushed in confusion. "We'd like to have you at the wedding, of course, but you see they wear uniforms."

The young men were still grumbling as they escorted the girls to the motor. Beth waited until the rest were seated, then called Hal aside and explained quietly: "I have a package I'd like to take with me. Do you think there is room near the chauffeur? It came too late to send by express."

"Of course there is room," Hal assured her. "If there isn't, we'll make it. Where is your package?"

"It's a basket, just inside the lower door. Don't let the others see it, please!" she implored. "It's to be a surprise."

Hal managed the matter very cleverly, and Beth's precious package was stowed away beneath the front seat, without any one's being the wiser. A fur rug covered it in its transit from the house to the car. Once or twice, during the trip, a plaintive little whine of protest issued from the depths of the basket, but the chauffeur alone heard it.

The Townsend place proved to be one of the fine old Colonial mansions for which Staten Island is famous. Its grounds overlooked the water, and

gave uninterrupted views of the forts, the Narrows, and the lower bay, with Coney Island's gleaming white towers in the distance. The Townsends belonged to one of the oldest Dutch New York families, and had only recently given up their town house on Washington Square for an all-the-year-round residence in their charming island home. In spite of what Grace had said, the other girls were taken by surprise at the beauty of both house and grounds.

“And to think how simple and unassuming she was at Fairmount,” Mary commented, when the Quartette were left to themselves, in one of the great drawing-rooms. “Such a handsome house! They have a yacht, too, I understand. I should think the Moffatts would feel a little ashamed when they see all this.”

“But you mustn't forget, though,” warned Beth, “that they gave in gracefully, before they saw ‘all this,’ Mary. It is so much more to their credit. I think Miss Townsend was plucky to hold out as she did. She knows now that they want her, and not her family or her possessions. I only hope — Oh! Look!”

She broke off abruptly, as a shimmering vision in white satin and delicate lace swept down the wide stairway, and paused at the door of the drawing-room. They had always considered Miss Townsend pretty, but this regal-looking young

creature was a surprise to them. It was their own Miss Townsend, however, who stepped forward and greeted them lovingly.

"My pretty Quartette!" she said, with an approving nod of the lace-crowned head, after she had surveyed them critically. "I am so glad to have you with me, oh! so glad! Do you like me?"

"Do we like you?" Belle murmured ecstatically. "You are beautiful! Beautiful!"

"My veil is old point," the bride said, fingering the priceless lace tenderly. "It belonged to my great-great-grandmother and I love it. Oh, dear! I knew I'd forget something, and I have."

"What is it?" "Let me get it for you!" came an eager chorus of offers.

"I'm breaking one of the traditions of the brides of our family!" she explained laughingly, yet in earnest, too. "We always adhere to the old couplet:

'Something old and something new,
Something borrowed and something blue.'

and I've completely forgotten the last qualification."

Quick as a flash Beth slipped a tiny blue bow from some part of her attire, and presented it, flushed and smiling. Then she fastened it just beneath the pearl embroidered band which decorated the front of the handsome gown.

“It doesn’t show, but it’s there,” she announced in pleased satisfaction, “and it’s blue!”

Mr. Townsend entered and was presented to the girls. He was a courtly old gentleman, with white hair, bushy eyebrows, and a ruddy complexion. He scanned them with his keen old eyes, and nodded in a pleased fashion. The Quartette had already met Mrs. Townsend, and had responded warmly to her motherly welcome.

“I want to thank you all for your beautiful gifts,” the bride began, but was checked by an audible chuckle from her father, so infectious a chuckle that Mrs. Townsend found herself smiling broadly, while even Miss Townsend herself, in spite of a valiant attempt to continue her thanks, was forced to give up and join in the laugh.

“It — they — are lovely, just lovely!” she gasped. “I’m sure, now, that great minds do run in the same channel, but I — I’m glad to have them all. Oh please, please forgive me! It was so comical.”

Before she had time to explain, she was interrupted by the entrance of the captain and the ushers. The handsome uniforms made a deep impression upon the girls, whose minds were filled with a queer mingling of elation and dread, when they thought of the coming ceremony. They were duly presented to the officers, and the whole party

went through a hurried rehearsal in order to avoid confusion at the church.

Miss Townsend was longing for a few moments alone with her mother for those precious last words which mean so much. That Mrs. Townsend shared this longing was evidenced by the way in which she hung about her daughter, with motherly little pats, and tremulous smiles: so Mr. Townsend diplomatically suggested that the rest adjourn to the library, where the presents were displayed.

"You can see them so much better now, before the other guests come," he urged.

"I think she must have received several percolators," Beth whispered to Mary, as the party started for the library. "Too bad, isn't it? Anyhow, ours is perfectly lovely."

"Of course that's it," Grace agreed. "She tried so hard not to laugh, but she couldn't help it. I wonder how many she received?"

By this time they had reached the library, a large room wainscoted and beamed in mahogany, with every inch of available space filled to overflowing with books. It was a stately apartment, with busts and pictures of famous writers, poets, and philosophers, for its ornamentation. As the invading party beheld it, its size was lost in the profusion of presents it contained. The girls looked at them in a maze of delight.

Such beautiful things they were! Shining silver,

in single pieces, sets, and even in great cases; sparkling cut glass, clocks, lamps, bric-a-brac; thermos bottles; a silver mounted traveling-case with every known and many an unknown contrivance; automobile hampers; dainty dishes; and all the many and various things with which friends deluge helpless brides. One table was filled with beautiful linens — doilies, center-pieces, scarfs and table-covers of fairy-like drawn-work or heavy embroidery — the gift of a friend in the Orient. Fastened to the chandelier by floating ribbons dangled a cheque marked: “This is an automobile.”

To the Quartette’s surprise only one percolator was visible — their own. It and its handsomely chased tray occupied a table by themselves, and elicited much admiration, both then and later.

“Queer, isn’t it?” whispered Mary. “Do you think she put the others away in order not to hurt our feelings?”

“But that would hurt some one else’s feelings,” objected Beth.

“There are some other gifts I want you to see,” Mr. Townsend said, as if in answer to their conjectures. “We have time to examine them if you care to. My daughter values them very highly, but we thought best not to display them with the other gifts, because —” he ended his speech with a chuckle of purest enjoyment.

"There!" Belle whispered softly. "It's just as I thought, duplicates!"

The old gentleman led the party through the hall to an enclosed piazza at the back of the house. It was an attractive place, steam-heated, furnished with rugs, easy-chairs, and swinging seats, and gay with palms, ferns, and blossoming plants. In the center of the floor stood two baskets, and two boxes, one of them very large. From all four of these receptacles issued sounds of canine woe, from a plaintive little wail, and a sharp bark, to a deep growl and a long-drawn howl.

The officers shouted with laughter at the array, and the girls themselves joined in, even though a very shrewd suspicion of what had happened was already making itself felt. A hasty glance at each other confirmed this suspicion, and Belle signaled to Mr. Townsend not to betray them.

"My daughter's Quartette," he announced genially, with an airy wave towards the four receptacles. "We thought it best to keep them apart for the present, as we are not yet acquainted with their various dispositions."

"This one is named 'Science,'" one of the ushers announced, as he read the card attached to the basket. "Come out here, Science, and let us see you."

The little fellow needed no coaxing whatever.

He was of a social disposition and deeply resented his incarceration.

"He's a little beauty!" the audience agreed enthusiastically, as a dainty white fox terrier, with black markings, tried to scramble into the young man's arms, to the detriment of his uniform.

"Tinker!" three of the Quartette exclaimed in surprise, for the tiny creature was an exact counterpart of Beth's pet.

"This one is named 'Thor!'" the inspection went on. "He's a dandy, a great Dane! I—I think I'll wait until I know you better, sir, before I take many liberties with you!"

"He's gentle," Mary said, then tried to retrieve herself by adding: "They say they usually are!"

"Number three is a Pomeranian," the men went on. "Let me see—named 'Spunky.' Hello, Spunk! you're friendly enough, at any rate."

"Here's a good fellow for you," was the fourth announcement, as a Boston bull-terrier was released. He looked up at them with a little face that was so ugly it was positively appealing! "You'd chew old 'Thor' up, wouldn't you, 'Bully?'"

"That's a pretty fine collection," one of the officers remarked admiringly. "If I had to choose, I don't know which I'd prefer. Masculine remembrances; that goes without saying. Takes a man to choose a good dog."

Mr. Townsend's expression was so comical as he listened to this summary settling of the case, that it may have given the clue. Or possibly the embarrassment of the girls, in spite of their efforts to appear indifferent, aroused suspicion. At all events the queer coincidence became known, and the hearty laugh which followed broke the ice of restraint most effectually.

"I'm not surprised that you all decided on the same gift," one of the men remarked, after the laughter subsided: "but the thing that takes me is the fact that you managed to keep it a secret from each other. That part is really wonderful," he added teasingly.

The church, a beautiful gray stone building, vine-covered in summer, was crowded to the doors as the wedding party left the carriages, and were met in the vestibule by the ushers. There was a moment's wait while the procession formed, then the grand strains of the wedding march pealed forth from the great organ, and they advanced to the altar. It was the same march the girls had hummed so lightly the day the invitation came, but oh! how different it sounded.

The interior of the church was decorated with palms and white roses, and the handsome dresses and brilliant uniforms added to its beauty, but the girls saw little of this as they marched up the aisle and took their places on either side of the altar.



MAUD
TOLSEY

"THE BRIDE HERSELF CUT THE CAKE WITH HER HUSBAND'S SWORD."

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Then the solemn words were uttered, the ring slipped upon the slender finger, and the procession re-formed, this time with a pale but smiling bride leaning upon the arm of her husband.

“It made you feel that getting married was a good deal more than just a handsome dress, and a ring, and a wedding-trip,” Belle said afterwards. “My heart pounded so hard it hurt. I wonder if Miss Townsend, I mean Mrs. Moffatt, felt that way, too?”

The guests drove at once to the Townsend home for the formal reception. After that was over the young people began to feel more at ease, and the wedding supper was a gay, informal one, with several laughing toasts and witty responses. The bride herself cut the cake with her husband’s sword, and so skilfully did she handle it that he laughingly accused her of practising beforehand.

“There is a ring in this cake,” she announced with mock solemnity, before she passed any of the pieces. “Whoever gets it — well, you all know the sign. It never fails in our family, never!”

There followed an anxious moment, as each one searched the slice with pleasurable anticipation, but no one spoke.

“How strange!” the bride said, after an eager wait. “I don’t see where it can be. I know it’s somewhere, because I put it in myself.”

“Ask Miss Gray to hold up both hands,” the

captain suggested mischievously. His quick eye had caught a rapid movement which, with the flush upon her usually pale cheeks, aroused his suspicions.

Belle tried to put her hands into her lap, but the officers on each side were too quick for her. Gently but firmly they held the slender hands up for inspection, and all the guests saw, held close to one pink palm by a vigorous pressure of the thumb, a shining golden circlet.

Belle was flushed and embarrassed until Millie remarked plaintively: "I wish I were as lucky as you are, Belle; I wanted to get that ring dreadfully!"

The laugh which greeted this frank statement put Belle at her ease once more. After that she wore her pretty gift in open triumph.

After the bride and groom left to prepare for their trip, the young people danced to pass the time. Mr. and Mrs. Townsend seemed to be the life of the party, although more than once Beth noticed a quickly smothered sigh from the latter. As one of the officers was seating Belle after a particularly enjoyable two-step, he asked her if she had seen the bridal carriage yet.

"It's great; you must see it," he urged.

They hurried to the front door, where they were joined by a number of the others. There, close to the piazza steps, stood a handsome coupé.

At first glance it looked much as other carriages, a trifle more shining, perhaps, and Belle was just about to express her disappointment when the officer led her along the piazza until she could see the back of the vehicle. There a great bunch of huge white chrysanthemums swayed amid wide streamers of white ribbon, while resting conspicuously upon the axle, held in place by great knots of the white ribbon, reposed a white shoe.

"The coachman's fixed; he is to put a white cockade in his hat, and a big knot of white ribbon on his whip after they get started," the officer explained volubly. "Won't old Moffy be furious! Oh, no! not at all! See here!" he dragged a large paper sack from behind one of the piazza pillars. "Rice!"

"They are the slowest creatures," Millie complained. "I'm just dying to see Miss Townsend, sister Winifred, I mean, in her going-away gown. It's pale gray with a hat to match, such a lovely dress! I'm going up-stairs to hurry them, shall I?"

"Do!" urged a chorus of voices. "They've prinked long enough."

They all entered the hall, and Millie had reached the landing when the telephone bell rang loud and long. Mr. Townsend started towards it, but was quickly restrained by his wife, who motioned to one of the ushers to answer it. He obeyed, and the customary "Hello!" was followed by a short

pause. Then he slapped his fist down on the table, and burst into a regular "ha ha!"

"Sold! every one of us! This is rich! It's Moffatt himself on the wire. They are at the ferry. He sends his love, and says we may keep the rice and the ribbons for souvenirs."

"Any one who gets ahead of old Moffat," one of his comrades remarked admiringly, "has to get up pretty early!"

They were all laughing over the success of the ruse—an automobile at the back entrance had carried the bride and groom away while the rest were dancing—so no one noticed Mrs. Townsend stealthily wiping from her eyes the moisture caused by the last few words from her "baby." As pre-arranged, she had stepped quickly to the telephone, as soon as the officer turned away, and had heard the soft voice say: "Good-by, mother darling!"

"God bless you and keep you, my dear one," she whispered softly, in reply.

The captain and his wife were to sail the next day, on the Old Dominion Line, for a honeymoon at Old Point Comfort. Several friends of the captain's were stationed at Fortress Monroe, so they would find more than enough entertainment awaiting them.

It was a beautiful wedding, and the Quartette felt honored in being chosen from among so many. The memory of the day never left them, even

later, when weddings were not of such infrequent occurrence. The bride's gifts to her bridesmaids were tiny jeweled lace-pins in the form of keys, in memory of the day when a lost key had detained Millie, and given the captain his longed-for opportunity. The design was a mystery to the others, and the girls kept the secret.

When the motor was waiting for the return journey, one of the officers enticed Belle into a palm-shaded corner on the pretense of showing her a wonderful begonia. He seemed to forget all about its wonders after they reached it, and began, instead, to speak of Fairmount.

"May I call upon you, Miss Gray?" he asked softly.

"Miss Horton receives on the first Monday of every month, both afternoon and evening," Belle replied demurely, her dimples all atwinkle.

"I don't care for Miss Horton's receptions," was the frank avowal. "I want to call upon you. May I? I prefer duets."

"I'm very sorry, but —" Belle paused tantalizingly, "— we have only choruses at Fairmount."

"But Captain Moffatt evidently took part in a duet," he persisted. "How did he manage it?"

"Oh! that's different," Belle replied. "Miss Townsend, I mean Mrs. Moffatt, was one of the Faculty, so she could select her own style of music."

"One of the Faculty!" he ejaculated. "You are joking!"

"Indeed I'm not! She had all the science classes, and we'll never, never have as fine a teacher again. All the scholars love her."

"But she is an only child! Her people seem to be able to keep the wolf at the gate, at least, and the gate's some distance off, you know!"

"Yes, I know, but she wanted to use her education to some purpose, and she preferred to be self-supporting. We all thought she was poor; she never mentioned her home at the Academy."

"And you really do not receive callers, you Fairmount girls?" the young man said, returning again to the charge like the good soldier he was.

"Are you in earnest?"

Belle nodded gravely.

"I am sorry, very sorry;" his tones showed his disappointment. "You are not like most boarding-school girls, that's certain."

"And Fairmount isn't like most boarding-schools," she replied gaily; "that's equally certain. Good-by!"

As they rode home the girls were silent, each busy with thoughts of the day's happenings. They seemed, somehow, to be older and wiser than when they started for the Townsends'. Perhaps the joyously solemn ceremony was responsible for it.

Two days later the Archer home buzzed with preparations for departure, just as the Academy had buzzed, three weeks before. After many hugs and kisses, and many affectionate good-bys, they were whirled up to the Grand Central. There they found awaiting them not only Hal and the Princeton party, but also Harvey Winton and Lee Carrollton and his friend. The latter seemed to have changed his opinion regarding girls with amazing suddenness. At the last moment little Mrs. Carrollton herself appeared to bid them “God speed.”

The boys were voluble in their hopes for a future reunion, which the girls echoed heartily. Several mysterious packages changed hands during the farewell chat, so that when the travelers were finally settled in the train, they found themselves surrounded by a remarkable collection of trophies in the form of flowers and fruit, books and bonbons.

“Rather different from our conveyance three weeks ago, isn’t it?” Belle remarked, after a disdainful glance about the car. “From the *Wyongomic* to this! How are the mighty fallen!”

“But they’ll rise again: remember father’s promise!” Grace said laughingly. “We’ll make him remember, too!”

Abby, dressed in a severely simple tailored suit, and looking very handsome, was with them, but

for her it was to be only a flying visit, to arrange affairs at home before taking up her work and study in New York.

"Grandmother wants me to return in a week at the latest," she said, with shy pride. "I am to enter Barnard right away."

"We are so glad for you, Abby," Grace assured her friend earnestly. "You've been just longing for college."

"I know it," Abby said with a little sigh; "but I'll miss you girls dreadfully!"

"We've had a perfectly lovely time, Gracie," Mary said very soberly; "and we thank you so much."

"I've enjoyed it as much as you have," Grace replied softly; "but after all, there's no place like Fairmount!"

"So say we all of us!" was the enthusiastic reply, to which Tinker, traveling in the car with them, on a special permit, and joyously free from the obnoxious red sweater, barked an assenting "Woof! woof! woof!"

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